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MAY 2008

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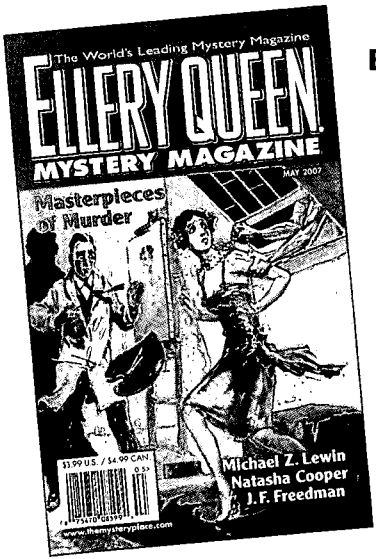
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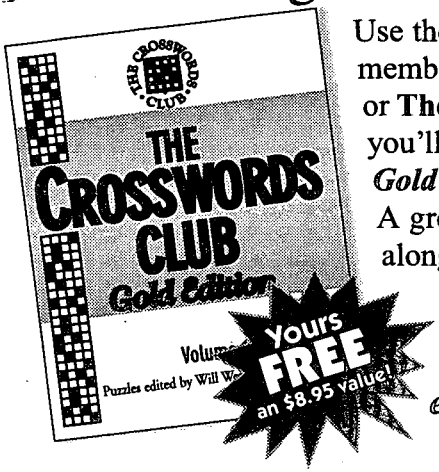
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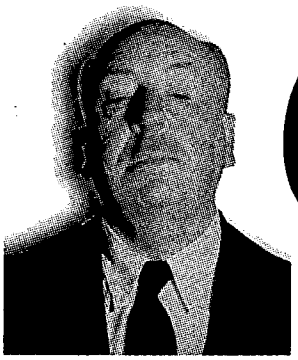
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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

PRIDE GOETH . . .

The "falls" in this month's issue are pratfalls. Our annual humor issue features seven stories that offer a healthy dose of Schadenfreude, finding pleasure in the pain of human foibles and criminal incompetence.

Robideau, the retired police chief of the town of End of Main, returns in Jas. R. Petrin's "Gang of Three"; filling in for Chief Butts, Robideau is faced with a widespread, if decidedly small scale, crime wave of minor thefts, though they lead to something larger and unexpected. In B. K. Stevens's "Table for None," an old man who normally dines alone at a pretentious restaurant attracts suspicion—and murder—when he is suddenly joined by a seedy-looking character. In Gary Alexander's "Pickled Zillionaires," an unsuccessful orthodontist on vacation in Mexico stumbles upon the chance of someone else's lifetime. Toni L. P. Kelner offers a new take on the hell that is high school in "Kangaroo Court." Cletus Johnston, Theodore Dewey, and Moklal Feringheea return in R. T. Lawton's "The Bondholder" as the bail bondsmen track down a client who has disappeared from a cruise ship. And James Powell's slightly surreal "Red Herring House" should stand as a warning to many mystery writers.

Our mystery classic this month is a rare treat: a new English translation of Okamoto Kidō's "The Room over the Bathhouse," in which the elderly Inspector Hanshichi once again recalls his adventures solving crimes in mid-nineteenth century Edo (Tokyo).

New this month, J. Rentilly takes over our Reel Crime column, with a look at how some Hollywood-connected novelists feel about seeing their books turned into film.

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TABLE FOR NONE

B. K. STEVENS

"And he shows up every night?" Miss Woodhouse asked.

"Every night for three whole years," the younger of the two women said. She looked about twenty-five, reasonably pretty and resolutely slim. "Practically the whole time I've been working at Chez Cubbe."

"And he always shows up around eight," the man said. He looked midway through his thirties, but his hair didn't match his age—shaved to a pale orange shadow on the sides and back, slicked into dark peaks on top. "And he always sits at the same table, always orders pretty much the same thing. He starts with a martini and a glass of water, and he nurses them for a solid hour—takes a sip of the martini, pours a little water into the martini glass, sip, pour, sip, pour, until both glasses are empty."

"Then he orders a cup of soup," the other woman said. She looked about fifty and had probably never been attractive, but she kept herself up—trim figure, careful makeup, studiously grayless brown hair cut sensibly short and combed into a just barely flirty arc that bumped up over her forehead. "Clam chowder, usually—it's the house specialty."

"Yeah, we got a real creative menu," the man said. He blew his nose disdainfully. "An Annapolis restaurant with clam chowder as the specialty—imagine that!"

"It's what people expect, Chuck," the young woman said, half smiling. "Anyhow, he takes a long time eating the chowder—or the tomato basil, he'll have that when it's soup of the day. The soup's served with a roll, but he wraps that up in a napkin and sets it aside. I bring him a basket of crackers too; he'll eat those."

"And sometimes I'll bring him a little something from the kitchen," Chuck added, "just as a freebie—if I'm trying out a new appetizer, say. He enjoys that."

"Then he orders a sandwich to go," the young woman resumed. "A turkey club, usually, but sometimes it's chicken salad with fresh tarragon, or ham with Swiss and honey mustard. And coffee. He stretches the coffee out till closing time—that's ten o'clock on

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weeknights, midnight on weekends. Then I bring him his check." She paused, clearly expecting to amaze us. "And every night, he pays with a crisp hundred dollar bill."

"Then Brenda brings him his change," the other woman said, sounding impatient, "and he leaves a three-dollar tip—never a penny more or less—takes his sandwich and roll, and leaves. That's the way it's been every night for three years."

"And you don't know anything about him?" I asked. "Not even his name?"

"It's Howard," Brenda said. "Terry finally asked him, and that's what he said—just Howard, no last name. At first, I tried to strike up conversations because he seems lonely. But it made him uncomfortable: He always loves to hear about what I'm doing, but he doesn't like to talk about himself. He's old—seventy, maybe—and doesn't wear a wedding ring, but that's all we know. Except, of course, that he's rich."

Professor Woodhouse looked up sharply from the mounds of uncooked pasta on the small mahogany table next to her rocking chair. "Do you base that conclusion solely on his habit of paying with hundred dollar bills? Or do you have solid evidence?"

It was the first time the professor had spoken, and all three of our visitors looked taken aback. They'd probably assumed she served a purely decorative function—the quaint, grandmotherly figure with her black shawl and long gray braid, musing serenely as she threaded manicotti and ziti onto long strands of dental floss.

"Well, gosh," Brenda said, tugging thoughtfully on her artfully highlighted hair. "I mean, what other evidence do you need? Plus he eats out every night, and he drives this great car—a classic Mustang in mint condition. I mean, he's gotta be rich, right?"

With every word she spoke, I could see Brenda losing points with the professor. As I'd learned long ago, the professor has a low tolerance for chatty incoherence and a special disdain for "I mean" as an interjection. The professor couldn't have liked the way Brenda was dressed, either—low-slung jeans and a tight, sleeveless T-shirt that skimmed her tummy; whenever she shifted in her chair, her navel peeked out. Professor Woodhouse is not the sort of person who enjoys looking at other people's navels. She's never told me this; she doesn't have to. By now, I know the professor well enough to feel sure she doesn't particularly enjoy looking at her own navel.

Miss Woodhouse spoke up quickly. "There are other ways of interpreting the hundred dollar bills," she said, "and the rest. But let that pass. I assume you have a specific reason for seeking help from a private detective at this point, that you're not

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simply troubled by the presence of an odd but exceptionally loyal customer."

"Hell, we're not 'troubled' by Howard," Chuck said. "We're afraid he's in some kind of trouble. He's a little weird, yeah, but he's a great old guy. Three months ago, this other guy started showing up every Thursday around nine, joining Howard at his table, talking to him real low and making him unhappy."

"And he's creepy looking," Brenda put in eagerly. "Tall and skinny, with a long ponytail and piercings and way too many tattoos. He always wears this crummy leather jacket and carries this ratty-looking red knapsack. And all he ever has is coffee, and he always leaves just a fifty-cent tip, even though he stays a full hour. Not that I care about the tips. Sometimes he takes something out of the knapsack—a piece of paper, like, or a photo—and gives it to Howard; sometimes Howard gives him an envelope. But Chuck's right. Whatever this guy's saying to Howard, it gets him all worked up."

"Last week," Chuck added, "Howard got so upset, he ordered a second martini."

"And he still left just a three-dollar tip," Brenda observed. "Not that I care."

"The point is," the woman called Terry said, "we're concerned. We've heard about con artists who prey on older people—we're afraid that might be going on. Not that I'm convinced we need a private detective. That was Brenda's idea, and she persuaded us to come along. What do you think, Miss Woodhouse?"

Miss Woodhouse sat back, thinking it over. As always, she looked imposing—almost six feet tall, broad shouldered, lean, black-gray hair pulled back hard and caught at the nape of her neck with a thick blue rubber band. Part of the reason she looks so impressive is that she clearly isn't trying—she doesn't bother with makeup and wears boxy beige suits chosen for utility only. The other reason she looks so impressive is that that's what she, in fact, is. "That depends," she said. "What would you like us to do?"

Brenda leaned forward, and the navel made another appearance. "We thought maybe you could, like, send some big, scary guys to the restaurant tonight and have them wait in the parking lot, and when this guy comes out they could tell him to stay away from Howard or else, and—well, you know. Shove him around. Rough him up."

"Just a little," Chuck added. "Just enough to scare him off."

Miss Woodhouse grimaced. "I don't employ any big, scary guys. And I'm not in the business of having people roughed up, not even just a little. What I *can* do is come to your restaurant, pose

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as a customer, and observe this man. When he leaves, I'll follow him, find out what he's up to. If it's appropriate, I'll warn him off or notify the proper legal authorities. First, though, we should discuss payment. Have you consulted Howard about this plan? Is he willing to—"

"That's okay," Chuck said. "We'll probably never tell him about this. *We'll* take care of the bill. I've got a little stashed away, Brenda's been saving her tips, and Terry said she'd chip in. We might even talk Little Dave into parting with a few bucks."

"Little Dave?" Miss Woodhouse said. "Who is that?"

Terry pressed her lips together and made the corners twitch. I think she was trying for a smile. "David Cubbe," she said. "My husband. He owns the restaurant."

"Yeah, he inherited Chez Cubbe from his father," Brenda said. "And everybody called his father Big Dave. So naturally, everybody calls Little Dave—well, Little Dave."

"Big Dave Cubbe," the professor said, nodding. "I met him. I ate dinner at Chez Cubbe on several notable occasions—my cousin's engagement, my parents' fiftieth anniversary, the day my tenure was revoked. Goodness! Such memories! Chez Cubbe used to be quite the spot—but isn't now, clearly. I thought it had gone out of business."

"Not yet," Chuck said. "But Little Dave's working on it."

"That's enough, Chuck," Terry said sharply. "Shall we please just stick to business." She didn't inflect her voice at all, didn't put a question mark at the end of the sentence.

"Very well," Miss Woodhouse said. "I'll come to the restaurant tonight and—"

"You shall do no such thing, Iphigenia," the professor cut in. "I will not have you going to a place where alcohol is served. You know how little restraint you have. You would surely disgrace yourself."

Oh brother, I thought. How do we defend Miss Woodhouse without admitting that while the professor is still sharp as ever in most ways, in other ways she's—well, confused? And once we admit that, how do we explain why Miss Woodhouse defers to her mother on business decisions and accepts all her insults meekly? Private detectives are supposed to be hard boiled; we'd sound scrambled.

Miss Woodhouse would not blush. "I appreciate your concern, Mother, but I assure you—"

"Not another word, Iphigenia," the professor said. "I will not have it. You may send little Harriet. She, at least, is sober and responsible."

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Our three potential clients exchanged uncertain looks. No wonder. "But she's a secretary," Chuck said. "Isn't she?"

"I'm Miss Woodhouse's assistant," I said. "I've followed lots of people—"

"Generally with little success," the professor put in cheerfully, "but always with a willing spirit. Do you remember, little Harriet, that afternoon when you attempted to follow a lime green SUV from Duke of Gloucester Street to Porter Road and ended up in Reston? Oh my! How we all laughed on that occasion!"

"That was a long time ago," I said, blushing plenty. "Anyhow, Miss Woodhouse, I'd be glad to handle this—if you're too busy with other cases."

I'd hoped that would sound tactful. Judging from the look Miss Woodhouse gave me, it didn't. "I'm not sure," she said. "The situation might be too dangerous for you. We know nothing about this man. Suppose he carries a gun?"

"So what?" Brenda asked. "I mean, she carries a gun, too, doesn't she?"

"Not usually," I said. In fact, I've never carried one. "But I know how to use one. I took a class." I looked at Miss Woodhouse hopefully. "If you'd lend me *your* gun—"

"Absolutely not," Miss Woodhouse said firmly. "You're not licensed for it, you're a terrible shot, and you're not levelheaded enough to be trusted with a firearm."

God. Why does anyone ever hire us? "Well, I won't need a gun," I said. "I'll just follow him at a safe distance." I turned to the woman called Terry—somehow, I knew she'd make the decision. "I'll come to Chez Cubbe tonight. Agreed?"

The three of them exchanged looks again. Then Chuck shrugged, Brenda nodded, and Terry sighed. "All right," she said. "But please understand, Miss Woodhouse, that if your assistant isn't able to follow this man—"

"If I lose him," I said, "you won't owe us anything. But I won't lose him."

That seemed to settle it. They all stood up, and Chuck drifted over to the professor's rocking chair and inspected her handiwork. "So you've got all this pasta, and all this dental floss," he said, "and you're making—what?"

Professor Woodhouse drew her head back and stared at him—incredulous, scornful, pitying. "Biodegradable wind chimes," she said. "Obviously."

"That's cool," Brenda said. "I design stuff too—jewelry, purses, like that. I mean, I don't actually *make* them, but I draw pictures, and I figure out how much it'd cost to manufacture them, how

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much you could charge, how much profit you'd make."

The professor looked at her coldly. "A fascinating enterprise, I am sure."

Chuck jabbed his coworker's arm. "Maybe you could lend Harriet *your* gun."

Brenda jabbed him back. "Will you *please* stop giving me a hard time about my gun," she said, turning to me. "It's just a *little* gun. See, my apartment was burglarized a few months ago—it's a first-floor apartment, near the city dock, cute neighborhood but not the safest. I wasn't home when it happened, so it was okay. I mean, the guy stole some stuff, but I didn't get hurt or anything, since I wasn't there, you know? But what if it happens again, when I *am* there? So I bought this little gun to keep next to my bed."

"And you've never had to use it," Terry said impatiently. "We should get back to the restaurant. Miss Russo, will you please arrive at seven thirty and come to the office first."

Once again, it wasn't a question. I saw them to the door, then rejoined Miss Woodhouse and the professor. "That warms your heart," I said. "Doesn't it? This Howard isn't their relative—he's not even a friend, really—but they're so concerned that they're dipping into their savings and hoarding their tips to help him. Getting rid of that creep won't benefit them—they just want to protect a lonely old guy. What nice people."

The professor, smiling, bit off a fresh length of dental floss. "You are a nice person, Harriet," she said. "Not a foolish ninny, generally speaking, but still so trusting, so eager to see the good. *That* warms my heart—and, simultaneously, chills my spine. Do be careful tonight, sweet child. What do you plan to wear?"

"What I'm wearing now," I said. "It doesn't sound like a fancy place."

"Nevertheless, you will be representing our firm; you must look your best. Here." She struggled with the clasp of her cameo brooch, then pinned it on my sweater. "This was my mother's—it has always brought me luck. I trust it will do the same for you."

Chez Cubbe is across the bridge from the Naval Academy, on a grassy bank of the Severn. It's sprawling and white and looks like it was once a private mansion, but it didn't look like a mansion now, and it wasn't just the driving rain that made it feel tired and shabby. The peeling paint, the sagging roof, and the weed-packed cracks in the parking lot all did their parts. Remembering Terry's instructions, I hurried to the back and knocked on an unassuming door. The man who opened it was five foot eight, looked to be in his mid forties, and had thinning reddish brown

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hair parted sharply on the left, plastered down hard on the right. He wore loose white pants and a red shirt with a black collar.

"Are you Harriet Russo," he asked, "the private detective?"

And what if I hadn't been? What if I'd been Jane Doe the restaurant robber? Wouldn't I have claimed to be Harriet Russo the private detective? This guy apparently hadn't considered that possibility. "That's right," I said. "And you must be Little Dave."

I hadn't meant to say that; I'd meant to say Mr. Cubbe. But this guy was so obviously a little one thing or another that the words just came out. He didn't seem to mind. Probably, everyone called him little.

"Yup," he said. "Come on in." He snatched the page that had just chugged out of the printer, stuffed it in his pocket, and exited from whatever site had been showing on the computer screen. "This guy who's bothering Howard," he said, "he's got a nasty look in his eye, like any second he could flip out, get violent. That doesn't scare you?"

It's my job not to get scared, I wanted to say. All my life, I've wanted to say something like that. But I imagined the look Miss Woodhouse would give me if she heard me say it, and I held back. "Not really," I said. "Do you know what kind of car he drives?"

"A beat-up white Chevy," he said. "Dirty, lots of dents. Y'know, I don't like the idea of you going up against him alone." He opened a file cabinet drawer and took out a revolver. "I keep this handy, just in case. You could borrow it—just in case."

"No, thanks," I said. Once again, the image of Miss Woodhouse's reaction held me back. I walked over to inspect an architect's drawing tacked to the wall. "This is your restaurant, isn't it?" I said. "I love the new entrance. And the landscaping!"

"Yeah, we're doing a major renovation." His eyes brightened. "Probably get started this spring. So, I'm supposed to show you around. What do you want to see?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "Where's your wife?"

"Terry?" he asked, as if unsure of which wife I meant. He paused. "She's probably at the hostess station." He paused again. "She's the hostess."

"Interesting," I said, casting about for a way to keep the conversation going. "And Brenda's a waitress, right? Is Chuck a waiter?"

"Sometimes," Little Dave said. "Mostly, he shops in the morning, sets up in the afternoon, buses tables, cleans up at the end of the day. Plus he's my sous chef."

"Sounds like he keeps busy," I said, and was relieved to hear the back door open and shut and to see Brenda walk in. She took off her dripping black raincoat and slung it on the coatrack, gave me

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a quick hug, gave Little Dave a longer one.

"Sorry!" she exclaimed. "Late again. I had an audition in the District—mostly dancing, and that's not my strength, but I did okay. Is Terry steamed?"

"Not too bad," Little Dave said. "It hasn't been real busy—she and Anne have managed. But you better get out there."

Pointing toward the dining room, he gave her a little swat on the behind. That didn't necessarily mean anything in particular. When I was a secretary in Cleveland, some of the men in the office gave me little swats like that when they told me to do something. I never liked it, but I knew it usually didn't mean anything in particular. But now, when he gave her that little swat, and she turned around halfway and met his eyes and half giggled, I thought maybe this time it *did* mean something in particular.

The door from the dining room opened and Terry stepped in, just in time to see the little swat, the half turn, the half giggle. She, too, seemed to think it meant something. "Finally," she said to Brenda. "Will you please get out there. Well, Miss Russo. You're here too. I thought you'd want to look around. At eight, you can come in through the front door and be seated at a table. Will you please come with me."

"Hey, I can show Harriet around," Little Dave said. "I'm heading back to the kitchen anyway, to see if Chuck needs help with—"

"He doesn't," Terry said. "In the last two hours, we've had nine customers; Chuck has coped with the rush. Should a tenth customer arrive, I will alert you. In the meantime, will you please circulate in the dining room. Charm customers. This way, Miss Russo."

Without hesitation, he headed for the dining room; without hesitation, I followed Terry down the narrow hallway that led to the kitchen. In the center of the room, Chuck stood at a butcher-block table, sneezing, lethargically chopping shallots.

"Chuck, will you kindly show Miss Russo around," Terry said. "And will you please cover your mouth when you sneeze. You'll infect our customers."

With that, she was gone. Chuck, who seemed wrapped in gloom, glanced at me briefly before refocusing his attention on his shallots. I attempted a smile.

"Slow night," I said. "Well, it's Thursday."

"It could be Saturday. It'd still be slow." Suddenly, he grabbed a small pot from the stove, thrust in a spoon, and handed it to me. "Taste," he ordered.

It was a cream sauce, specked with green and black and red. I tasted—hesitantly, then incredulously. "My God," I said. "This is so good."

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"Isn't it?" he demanded. "And it's my recipe. I'm going to ask Little Dave to let me drizzle it on his damned poached scallops. He'll say no. Know why?"

I shook my head. I didn't know, I didn't care. I just wanted more sauce.

"Because he didn't come up with it," Chuck said. "And as far as he's concerned, nothing I come up with can be good enough to serve because I'm a sous chef. Sous chef! How the hell can I be a sous chef? To have a sous chef, you gotta have a chef, right?"

"I guess," I said. "And you don't consider Little Dave a real chef?"

"Him? Please." He brought his knife down brutally, reducing the shallots to goo. "He's never come up with a decent recipe in his life, and he burns half the stuff he cooks, leaves the other half raw. You know the only thing he's good at?"

Maybe if I humored him he'd give me more sauce. "What?" I asked.

"Buying useless junk." He yanked a drawer open and started holding things up. "Just look at this stuff. A garlic press. A garlic peeler. A garlic pulverizer. A deluxe Sir-Chops-A-Lot. A Minute Marinator. A nutmeg juicer. He shells out good money for these stupid gadgets, then never uses them. You know the only thing a real chef needs?"

"What?" I asked, my eyes still on that little pot simmering on the stove.

"A good knife." Chuck held up the knife he'd used to butcher the shallots—broad grooved blade, bright orange handle. "With one good knife, a real chef can do everything he needs to do. But Little Dave—he leaves all the prep work to me, insists on doing the actual cooking himself, and botches everything." He shook his head. "Big Dave—he was a real chef, built this place up from nothing. I started working here when I was a teenager—I was like a son to him, and he taught me a lot. But he left Chez Cubbe to Little Dave, and Little Dave's running it straight into the ground. It's not right."

Brenda slipped into the kitchen. "Howard's here," she said, keeping her voice unnecessarily low. "Terry says Harriet should come watch him." She walked over to me. "Hey, cool brooch—nice vintage look. I design jewelry, did I tell you?"

"You mentioned it this afternoon," I said. "And you also audition for shows?"

"Yeah, well, most celebrities these days design stuff," she said, examining the brooch more closely. "So I figure when I finally get my break in acting or singing—I'm real good at both—I should have a few lines of merchandise ready to go."

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"You'll get that break." Chuck gave her a look heavy with adoration. "You should've got it long ago. Those guys must be crazy. Crazy and blind."

Brenda smiled at him—warmth, gratitude, real affection, no matching adoration. "You're sweet," she said. "Harriet, better get out there."

Obediently, I walked to the front door and entered as a customer. Doing a good job of pretending not to recognize me, Terry led me to a table a few yards away from the table occupied by a man who had to be Howard—seventyish, gaunt, thinning gray hair, thick gray sweater, water glass and martini glass both still full. He had a sweet, trusting face, I thought, and a sad, quiet way about him.

After Brenda came to my table and recited the specials in a falsely casual tone, I gazed around the dining room. It was spacious—too spacious, making the few customers look like castaways in an ocean of threadbare carpet. Once, it might have been described as quietly elegant or subtly luxurious; now, the only phrase it brought to mind was "deferred maintenance." The figurines at the center of each table were intriguing, though. I picked mine up—eight inches tall, so heavy it had to be iron, polished to a grudging sheen. It was a lion cub wearing a chef's hat, jauntily holding a spoon aloft. It took me a minute to figure it out—Chez Cubbe, lion cub. Cute, I thought, and set it down.

As I worked my way through a limp salad, I kept sneaking glimpses at Howard, hurting my neck but learning little: He ate slowly, he looked gloomy, and that was all I could say about him. At one point, Chuck brought him asparagus topped with creamy sauce—that amazing sauce, I thought, envying Howard. At another point, Little Dave came to his table to chat and slap him on the back. Finally, just before nine, just as I got my grilled chicken and Howard got his turkey club, the mystery man arrived. I perked up.

This guy looked like trouble, all right. He matched Brenda's description tattoo for tattoo, piercing for piercing, ratty red knapsack for ratty red knapsack, but she hadn't mentioned the constant over-the-shoulder glances, the fidgeting fingers, the general twitchiness. As he spoke to Howard in a low, urgent tone, he kept picking things up, turning them around, setting them down—fork, spoon, iron lion cub chef figurine, salt shaker, pepper grinder. Even at a distance, his jitteriness put me on edge.

But what was he saying? I strained, but couldn't hear. I couldn't blame Terry for not seating us closer together—in a mostly empty dining room, it might've seemed odd. At least sawing off slivers of petrified chicken kept me busy.

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Shortly before ten, the mystery man pitched his voice still lower, twitched still more sharply, and handed Howard a bedraggled sheet of paper. Howard glanced at it and put it in his shirt pocket. Fine. Brenda had already boxed up my nearly intact dinner, and I'd already paid and tipped. Casually, I strolled to the parking lot, got in my car, and waited. At least the rain had stopped, I thought. That would make my job easier.

Moments later, the mystery man came out, got into a dented white Chevy, and pulled onto the street. I counted to ten before following, pleased to see a Corvette and a Mitsubishi between us. He won't spot me, I assured myself, I was being discreet as hell.

He crossed the bridge, heading for the historic district, and stopped at a mildly seedy coffee house. Luckily, a spot was open across the street. For nearly an hour, I waited in my car, sometimes nervous, sometimes bored. Finally, he came out and drove on. I followed. He crossed the bridge again and got on Ritchie Highway, heading toward Baltimore. Maybe he was a commuting con man. When we reached Arnold, he got off the highway and drove to a waffle house with an "Open All Night" sign blinking sleepily in its window. He pulled into the lot in back; I parked across the street, wondered who'd want to eat waffles all night, and settled back for another long wait.

Then the door to my car was yanked open, and the mystery man stood inches from me, pale, shaking, furious. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded. "Why are you following me?"

Time for a tough, clever comeback, I thought. "Excuse me?" I said.

"Don't give me that," he shot back, though as far as I could tell, I hadn't given him anything. His eyebrow ring quivered. "You were in the restaurant—you kept watching me. You work for Eddie Three Ears, don't you? So he figured it out. Well, tell him it won't do him any damn good. She's not coming back—I won't let her. So he damn well better back off. And you—you back off, too, or I'll make you sorry you didn't."

He slammed the door and was gone. Good grief, I thought, and it was a solid minute before I could calm down enough to think anything else. The next thought that did come was that I'd better call Miss Woodhouse and tell her I'd messed up.

I didn't have time to feel bad about that, though, because already someone was rapping sharply on my window. I shrieked, jerked forward so hard my seat belt nearly knocked the wind out of me, looked to my left, and saw Little Dave's face pressed against my window. "Hey," he said. "Come out."

Numbly, I got out of the car. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

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"I told you I didn't feel right about you going up against this creep all alone," he said. "So I followed you—I been following you the whole time. You didn't spot me?"

I shook my head. Of course I hadn't spotted him. Idiotic excuse for a private detective that I am, I never spot anyone. Instead, people spot me.

"Well, I was pretty cagey," he said smugly. "Oh man. When he ripped your door open, I thought you were dead for sure. But I brought you something. Here."

He stuffed it in my jacket pocket. "No," I said. "No guns. Miss Woodhouse—"

"That's not all," he said. "His car's parked behind the waffle house, beside the dumpster. I sneaked a peek while he was hassling you, and that red knapsack is in the back. Let's grab it—I bet that'll tell us what he's up to. I bet the car isn't locked."

"No," I said. "What if he comes out and—"

"Hell, he's been in that place two minutes at most," Little Dave said confidently. "Waffles don't cook that fast. We got plenty of time. Come on!"

He raced off. For a moment, I stood frozen. Call Miss Woodhouse and tell her how I'd botched things—let Little Dave get himself killed and feel guilty for the rest of my life—follow him into the parking lot and risk getting killed myself. On the whole, the last option seemed most attractive. I raced after Little Dave.

He stood next to the dirty white car, hissing into his cell phone. "Damn it, Terry," he said in a harsh whisper. "I told you not to call me. No, I won't tell you where I am. Just go home. I'll see ya when I see ya." He snapped his phone shut and yanked on a back door of the car. It didn't budge. He looked straight at me, grinning sheepishly.

That's pretty much the last thing I remember—I have some vague impression of something crashing down against me, of sharp pain and sudden darkness. But my next definite memory is of fading slowly back into consciousness—of hearing sirens blare, of feeling the cement against my back, of seeing Little Dave sprawled a few feet away from me, of spotting a small iron figurine next to him, of falling into darkness again.

"I have some questions for you, Miss Russo," the man said.

Groggy as I felt, I knew who he was—Detective Barry Glass, the man Miss Woodhouse had dumped over a decade ago when the professor had some kind of breakdown and made her daughter give up her fiancé and her police career. I tried to sit up, didn't

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make it, and looked around. I was on a cot in a small, white, nearly empty room with a heavy antiseptic smell. He sat next to the cot on a straight-backed chair.

"Is this a hospital?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "The doc says you're fine—probably not even a concussion."

I tried to sit up again and made it this time. "I should call Miss Woodhouse."

"I already called her. She's in the waiting room just outside." His whole face twitched hard, brow to chin. "With her mother."

Poor Barry Glass. The professor despised him, always treated him like dirt—I couldn't figure it out, nobody could figure it out, because he's really an awful nice guy. I rubbed my forehead as memories came back. "Little Dave," I said. "Is he all right?"

Barry Glass shook his head. "He's dead. That's why I gotta ask you questions. How did you and him end up in that parking lot?"

"He followed me," I said. "I was working on a case—Miss Woodhouse probably told you. Well, I followed this guy to a coffee house, then to the waffle house. But he'd spotted me, and he came to my car and threatened me. Then Little Dave rapped on my car window and said he'd been following me the whole time."

Wincing, Barry Glass shook his head. "Now, I know that's a lie. Try again, Miss Russo. Tell the truth this time."

"That *was* the truth." I stared at him, confused. "Little Dave followed me from—"

"No he didn't," Barry Glass cut in. "You and David Cubbe arranged to meet in that parking lot, didn't you? What was the plan?"

"There was no plan," I insisted. "I didn't want him to follow me. He just—"

"No." He handed me a plastic-wrapped sheet of paper. "We found this in his pocket—see? He did a Mapquest search at 7:28, had the route from Chez Cubbe to the waffle house all mapped out. He knew exactly where he was going—he didn't have to follow you. You knew exactly where you were going, too, didn't you?"

I remembered walking into the office at Chez Cubbe and seeing Little Dave grab a page from the printer. It must have been the map. "This doesn't make sense," I said. "Why hire me to follow this guy if he already knew—oh no." A horrible thought came to me. "Little Dave stuffed a gun into my pocket. You said he's dead. Was he—?"

"He wasn't shot," he said. "We found the gun—his prints on it, but not yours, and it looks like it's never been fired. Don't worry about that. Just come clean with me."

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"I have," I said. "I was hired to follow this man, and that's all I did."

Barry Glass sighed. "You said this man threatened you. What did he say?"

"Crazy things," I said. "It was all like, 'I saw you at Chez Cubbe,' and 'You must work for Eddie Three Ears,' and 'Back off or else.' "

He straightened up. "He mentioned Eddie Three Ears? You're sure?"

"Positive," I said. "Have you heard of him? Is he a real person?"

"He's real, all right," Barry Glass said grimly. "He's bad news—pimp, drug dealer, works out of Baltimore. So Stanley Carson's mixed up with Eddie Three Ears."

"Stanley Carson?" I said. "Is that the name of the man I was following? Is he the one who knocked me out and killed Little Dave?"

"That's his name," Barry Glass said. "We got it from the cook in the waffle house; Carson's his friend, stops by every Thursday night to visit for a few minutes. As to what Carson did, we're working on that. *Somebody* knocked you out and killed Little Dave. And stole some things, presumably. Little Dave's watch and wallet and phone were gone. What about you? Were you wearing a watch? Any other jewelry?"

I looked down at my wrist and realized my trusty Timex was missing. Carson must be hard up to steal a Timex. "Yes, I was wearing a watch," I said, "and a turquoise ring, and—oh God. The brooch. The professor's brooch. Oh no!"

His eyes filled with alarmed sympathy. "Oh man. Professor Woodhouse lent you a brooch, and it's gone? That's a tough break. If you want, I'll tell her you *do* have a concussion. I'll tell her you almost died. Would that help?"

"Probably not," I said. "But thanks for the thought. Have you arrested Carson?"

"We can't find him," he said. "Best guess is, he did whatever he did, then took off in a hurry. He did call 911, though, from his cell phone, to report there were two people hurt or dead next to the dumpster. That's how we found you so fast."

"Handy," I said. "A criminal who calls in his own crimes. But Little Dave . . . if he wasn't shot, how was he killed? And do you know what Carson hit me with?"

"We're waiting for lab reports on Little Dave," Barry Glass said. "As to what you were hit with, we found something—a little iron statue of a lion in a chef's hat. That could've been what your assailant used. Any idea what it is?"

"It's a centerpiece," I said. "When we were at Chez Cubbe, I saw

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Carson fiddling around with the one on his table. He could've stolen it, hidden it in his jacket."

"That'd fit," he said, nodding. "The statue's covered with fingerprints. We'll know soon if they're Carson's—we got plenty of his prints on file. Possession, car theft, all kinds of stunts he pulled, probably to support his habit. Nothing for the last five years, though—the cook at the waffle house said Carson sobered up and took a job at a halfway house in Baltimore. Guess he didn't get as sober as the cook thought. All right, Miss Russo. Let's go through your story once more. Give me the exact truth this time."

"That's what I gave you last time," I said, but went over it again, filling in all the details I could scrape up, making my head hurt even more fiercely. We'd started a third run-through when Professor Woodhouse burst in, an orderly clinging to her arm.

"Naughty man!" she cried, pointing at Barry Glass. "You have kept this poor child in here nearly two hours, despite the injuries she suffered. She is innocent of any wrongdoing and utterly without guile. I told you that before you began this merciless interrogation, I tell you again now. Yet you persist. You, sir, are a bully and a fool."

Detective Barry Glass jumped to his feet, swallowed twice, and pointed shakily at me. "She lost your brooch," he said.

"And what if she did?" the professor demanded. "I am sure she did so in the pursuit of justice. Come, little Harriet. Your ordeal is over. I am taking you home."

Barry Glass took one timid step forward. "The doc says she should spend the night here for observation, in case—"

"And who is better able to observe her than I?" the professor countered. "My daughter and I shall gather her to our collective bosom. She shall sleep in the blue bedroom, and we will take turns sitting up with her all night. Harriet! Come!"

Barry Glass isn't an idiot—he knows when he's beaten. He bowed his head, the professor wrapped a mighty arm around me, and we were gone.

I woke up the next morning to the soothing impression of sunlight warming crisp linen curtains, to the sight of Miss Woodhouse sitting in the Queen Anne chair near my bed, her eyes fixed on the laptop perched on the nightstand.

She glanced at me. "Feeling better?" she asked.

"Much," I said.

She nodded. "The bathroom's down the hall to the left. You'll find towels in the cupboard, fresh clothes in the closet. Half an hour. Mother's making breakfast."

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I don't know how she managed the fresh clothes, and I didn't press for details: It doesn't do to press the Woodhouses for details about how they manage things. I showered and changed, arriving downstairs just as the professor was setting breakfast on the table—tuna macaroni salad, sweet potato casserole, olive-and-onion scones, Jell-O.

"Sit, little Harriet," she said, beaming. "Eat well and tell us about last night."

I ate everything, told them everything, answered all their questions. When I finished, Miss Woodhouse folded her napkin. "Now I'll tell you what I know," she said. "I've spoken to the coroner's office and the police department—"

"Not to That Man, I trust," her mother said icily, buttering a scone.

Miss Woodhouse glanced away. "He's the officer in charge of the case, Mother. First, as to Little Dave's cause of death. Lab results are still pending, but he had a large, clumsy puncture wound on his neck. The coroner thinks it's from a hypodermic needle. He was injected with something—evidently not a street drug, more likely some household chemical—and that evidently killed him."

"Well, Detective Glass said Stanley Carson's been arrested for possession in the past," I said, "and that he stole to support his habit. A drug addict, a hypodermic needle—that fits."

"That's the prevailing theory with the police," she said, "though Carson seems to have been clean for years, and it's hard to say why an addict would carry about a hypodermic loaded with household chemicals. At any rate, those were indeed his prints on the iron figurine. Traces of your blood were found on it too."

"So Carson's definitely the one who hit me," I said.

Miss Woodhouse shrugged. "It appears so."

Her mother looked at her and smiled. "But you don't think so."

"I think we've been manipulated," Miss Woodhouse said, "and I don't like that thought. Three people came to see us yesterday and said they wanted to get rid of a troublesome man. With our help—and Little Dave's—they are now rid of him. He's wanted for murder, and the police can't find a trace of him."

"So he's hiding out," I said. "That figures—it's what a guilty person would do."

"Or a scared person," Miss Woodhouse said, "who knows he'd be easy to frame."

"You think someone's framing him?" I said. "Who?"

"I'm not sure," she said, "but yesterday afternoon might well have created the impression we'd be unlikely to detect an attempt to frame an innocent person and might even be maneuvered into

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becoming unwitting accessories in such an attempt."

I thought of the things Miss Woodhouse and her mother said when Brenda, Terry, and Chuck were here. Well, sure. After the show we'd put on, who *wouldn't* think that Miss Woodhouse is an irresponsible drunk, that I'm too flighty to handle a firearm? And then Little Dave had promptly tried, twice, to put a gun in my hand. "Do you think Little Dave hoped I'd panic and shoot Carson? But Little Dave was the one who got killed."

"Perhaps the plan went wrong," Miss Woodhouse said, "or perhaps he knew about only part of the plan. Think about the computer map found on Little Dave's body. Clearly, somebody already knew Carson always went to the waffle house after leaving Chez Cubbe. Probably somebody had followed him there."

"Could be," I agreed. "They've been wondering about this guy for three months. It wouldn't be surprising if someone decided to follow him."

"And managed to do so without being detected," the professor put in brightly and gave me a friendly wink. I blushed.

"Be that as it may," Miss Woodhouse said, "I doubt Little Dave was the one who followed Carson—he wouldn't need a map if he'd already driven the route himself. Someone else must have followed Carson, told Little Dave, and drawn him into the plan. But this person must not have known Little Dave decided he needed a map—not if this person had been planning all along to kill Little Dave and frame Carson."

"So you think maybe Brenda or Terry or Chuck wanted to get rid of both Little Dave and Carson," I said. "Do they have alibis?"

"Not strong ones," Miss Woodhouse said, "according to the police. After Carson left Chez Cubbe, Little Dave and Terry had an argument. He wanted to follow you, she told him not to be a fool, he insisted. Then the restaurant closed for the night, and Brenda and the other waitress left, as usual. Normally, Chuck stays to clean up, but his cold had grown worse, so he went home. Terry remained at Chez Cubbe, did some cleanup, and got home shortly before midnight, when police came to tell her Little Dave was dead."

"Do any of them have anyone to back up their stories?" I asked.

"Brenda might," she said. "So far, the police have found several people who saw her at the bar, but no one who's sure she was there before eleven. That makes the timing for her tight but possible. Chuck went to bed without seeing or talking to anyone. There's nothing to back up Terry's story—except the phone conversation you overheard."

"She could've lied about still being at the restaurant," I said.

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"And she's the one with a motive, right? With Little Dave dead, won't she inherit Chez Cubbe?"

"Presumably," she said. "But inheriting a failing restaurant isn't a strong motive."

"Well, Little Dave must've had cash too," I said. "He was planning renovations. Anyhow, the other two don't have any motive. Little Dave and Brenda seemed to be on friendly terms—very friendly. Chuck didn't like Little Dave much, but—"

"Yes, you said you sensed ill will between them," the professor cut in. "Why?"

"Chuck thought Little Dave was a lousy chef," I said. "Always burning stuff, always wasting money on gadgets like a Minute Marinator, a Sir Chops-a-Lot, a—"

"A Minute Marinator?" the professor asked. "How oxymoronic. What is it—a compression chamber of some sort?"

"Not a chamber," I said. "It's just a thing you hold in your hand. There's a thick tube—you must put the marinade in that—and there's a plunger, and there's a pointy thing you must stick into the meat, and then—oh my God."

I stared at them; they stared at me. "It's like a hypodermic needle," Miss Woodhouse said. "A large, clumsy hypodermic needle. Isn't it?"

"Exactly like that," I said and jumped up, looking around wildly for my purse.

When Miss Woodhouse and I arrived at Chez Cubbe just before nine o'clock, we found Chuck in the kitchen. Cupboard doors stood open; most shelves were empty; pots, pans, bowls, and cooking implements crowded the countertops. Chuck greeted us perkily.

"Hey, Harriet!" he said. "Great to see you up and around. Nice to see you, too, Miss Woodhouse. Shame about Little Dave, isn't it?"

"It is," she said, looking around the room. "You seem to have major preparations underway. I would have thought the restaurant wouldn't be open tonight."

"It's not," he said. "Terry says we should stay closed a few days, outta respect. I had to come finish cleanup anyway, so I thought I'd use the time to reorganize the cupboards—I been wanting to do that for a long time."

And now you have a free hand, I thought. "Your cold seems better," I observed.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Just a twenty-four-hour thing, I guess. You guys hungry?"

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"No, thank you," Miss Woodhouse said. "But Harriet's description of your cooking gadgets aroused my curiosity. She mentioned a Sir Chops-a-Lot and a Minute Marinator—might I see them?"

"You can have them," he said, opening a drawer. "I don't want them. Here's the Sir Chops-a-Lot, and—that's funny. The Minute Marinator should be here too."

"Perhaps Little Dave moved it," Miss Woodhouse suggested.

"Why? He never used it." Chuck scratched his head, shrugged, and opened the immense dishwasher, packed full with clean dishes. "Here it is," he said. "Little Dave must've used it after all. Weird. What the hell did he marinate?"

Or maybe, I thought, someone marinated Little Dave. A dishwasher-safe murder weapon—if it had been loaded with poison last night, there wouldn't be a trace left.

"If you don't mind, I think I *will* take this," Miss Woodhouse said, dropping it into her purse. "It intrigues me. Will Terry keep the restaurant going, do you think?"

"Doubt it," Chuck said. "She married into the restaurant business, but I never got the impression she likes it much. She'll probably sell."

"And will you buy?" I asked. "You said you have some savings stashed away."

"Not that much," he said, "not on the measly salary Little Dave paid me. Of course, if I could find a partner—who knows? Sure I can't fix you something?"

Miss Woodhouse agreed to omelets, probably to give us an excuse for sticking around. Watching the jaunty way Chuck set butter sputtering in the pan and cracked three eggs at a time and sliced small mountains of peppers and onions, I had to conclude he wasn't weighed down by grief. As he slid the omelets onto our plates the door from the parking lot opened, and Brenda stepped in. I noticed how pale she looked, how weary.

Chuck glanced at her, then looked away. "I called you last night," he said, "after the cops came by my place. But you weren't home. Where were you?"

"Clubbing." She glanced self-consciously at Miss Woodhouse. "I went home for maybe like ten minutes, and then I went to a bar. I didn't get home till after two."

"On a Thursday? You must've been having a good time." He couldn't keep his tone light. "Meet anybody special?"

"Please," she said. "I just came to get my raincoat. I left it here last night—it was soaked. But it's my only black coat, I thought I might need it for . . . well, you know. Then I'm gonna go see Terry to, like, pay my respects. Have you gone yet, Chuck?"

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"No, I been here since six this morning," Chuck said, "and I'm sorta into stuff. I'll go later, talk to her about the wake. I think we should have it here, invite other restaurant owners, food critics, like that. I'll cook—I got great ideas for appetizers."

"Sounds nice," Brenda said, heading for the office. It was several minutes before she came back, the coat belted tightly around her waist, her hands thrust deep into its pockets. She tossed her hair back, looked at me, and smiled.

"So, tell me about last night," she said. "The cops wouldn't give me details."

I didn't volunteer many either. "That's all I remember," I finished.

"So this Carson knocked you out and killed Little Dave." Brenda's face looked flushed now, not pale. "That's it? He didn't, like, steal anything?"

"I forgot to mention that," I said. "Apparently, he took Little Dave's wallet and phone, plus jewelry from both of us."

"Really?" she said. "He took all the jewelry you had on? Everything? Too bad. Well, I've got errands to run before going to Terry's. See you later, Chuck."

"If you feel like it," he said, still not looking at her, "come back later. I'm gonna try out some recipes for the wake. You could sample them, if you feel like it."

"I'll call you," she said, and left. We lingered, savoring our omelets but not learning much from Chuck. Then Miss Woodhouse decided we, too, should make a sympathy call. I agreed, glumly. Yesterday, when she'd had no reason to dislike me, Terry had been curt; today, when she might blame me for her husband's death, she'd be worse. But Miss Woodhouse was right. As detectives, as human beings, we had to go see her.

The house she'd shared with Little Dave bordered the historic district, not ten minutes from the restaurant. Like most houses in the area, it was old and small, with the automatic charm most old, small houses in Annapolis have. She opened her front door, lifted an eyebrow at the sight of us, and led us to a tiny living room decorated in shades of beige. She wore a widowlike black skirt and sweater, but every hair was in place, her makeup was as precise as it had been yesterday, her air was placid. She looked fine.

"I suppose," she said, crossing her legs, "you've come about payment. Will you talk to Brenda and Chuck about that. They may feel obligated to pay. I do not."

"We don't expect payment," Miss Woodhouse said, matching Terry's passionless primness exactly. "We came only to express our sympathy."

Terry lifted the other eyebrow. "I doubt that," she said.

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When she's right, she's right. Miss Woodhouse nodded. "We also came to see if we can learn more about last night. A client was killed, my associate was injured, yet we don't know just what happened or why. Can you tell us anything that might help us?"

"Nothing," Terry said. "I warned my husband not to follow Miss Russo. Later, when I called him just before I left the restaurant, I told him to come home. He wouldn't listen. Now he's dead. I must say, Miss Russo, I would have thought a private detective could do a better job of protecting a client."

It wasn't my job to protect him, I wanted to say, he wasn't supposed to be there. But that would be beyond tactless. "I'm sorry," I said.

She looked me over coldly. "I suppose," she said, and stood up.

Clearly, she thought it was time for us to go. Thank God, Miss Woodhouse agreed. As we walked to the car, we saw Brenda walking up the street from the opposite corner. She spotted us, waved, but didn't slow her pace; in another minute, she was in the house.

"Terry didn't seem grief stricken," I observed after we got into the car.

"No," Miss Woodhouse agreed. "She could be being brave, but I'd guess it wasn't a particularly happy or loving marriage. That doesn't make her a murderer."

"It also doesn't give us any reason to think she's *not* a murderer," I said. "Brenda seemed more upset. But maybe it was an act—she says she's a good actress. Chuck didn't even try to act upset, and he didn't get defensive when you asked about the Minute Marinator. That could mean he's innocent, right?"

"Or very clever," she said, "or very, very dense. Our next task is to find Howard and ask why Carson was hounding him. That's our project for this afternoon."

It sounded tedious, possibly hopeless. Luckily, we didn't have to attempt it. When we got to Woodhouse Investigations, there was a classic Mustang in the driveway. When we walked into the east parlor, Howard was drinking tea with the professor.

"At last, Iphigenia," the professor said. "I hope you haven't exhausted Harriet. Allow me to introduce Mr. Howard Braxton. He came here minutes after you left. He heard a news report that Little Dave had been killed and a Woodhouse Investigations employee injured. He's eager to help but reluctant to go to the police. So he came here."

As simple as that. "I feel horrible about Little Dave," Howard said, shaking Miss Woodhouse's hand. "And to think I caused his death by meeting Stan at Chez Cubbe! But I never thought Stan could kill anyone. I can still hardly believe it."

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"Perhaps you don't have to," Miss Woodhouse said. "Perhaps that's not how it happened. Please, sit down. And tell me about Stanley Carson."

"I've already told your mother." Howard's face creased with shame and agony. "But I'll tell it all again—though I'm not proud of anything I've got to say."

It was a sad, terrible, ordinary story. Some twenty years ago, Howard had been a successful Philadelphia CEO with a comfortable marriage and an eight-year-old daughter named Amy. Then came the affair with a woman half his age—a midlife crisis, he called it, with a wince that said he knew that didn't excuse it—and he'd left wife and daughter behind. Bitter and proud, his ex-wife refused alimony and moved to a distant state, taking Amy with her. She'd done all she could to discourage visits; Howard admitted he hadn't tried hard to keep them up. Years later, when he learned of his ex-wife's suicide, he'd tried to find his daughter, but afraid of angering a new wife jealous of other claims on his affection or his money, he again hadn't tried hard. Amy had been lost in the foster care system, just another rebellious teenager prone to running away, doing her best to alienate anyone who tried to help her, driven by hatred for the father she blamed for her mother's death. It wasn't until his second wife left him that Howard hired private detectives to track his daughter down. By then, the trail had frosted over.

"They found bits of information," he said, "none of it good. Drugs, jail, worse things. But they couldn't find Amy. I gave up. By then, I'd retired and moved here—I love the water, and Philadelphia held painful memories. Three months ago, Stan Carson called and said he could put me in touch with Amy. I didn't know anything about him, so I didn't want him to come to my apartment. I thought a public place would be safer."

"So you met at Chez Cubbe every Thursday," Miss Woodhouse said.

"Yes. He told me Amy was in trouble, hiding out, but he wouldn't tell me where. She'd angered a man—a criminal who deals in drugs and in, well, other things."

"Eddie Three Ears," I said. That was the man Carson had accused me of working for, the pimp and drug dealer Barry Glass had spoken of.

"That's right," Howard said. "Stan said Amy had worked for this man. But she'd hated and feared him and finally found the courage to try to break away. He wanted her back—he said she'd stolen from him. Perhaps she had. Probably, he wanted her back so he could kill her, make an example of her. So Amy was hiding, and

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Stan was helping her stay hidden. At least, that's what he said. I don't know if it was true."

"Didn't Carson show you proof?" Miss Woodhouse asked.

Howard lifted his hands. "He showed me a picture. Maybe it's Amy. The last time I saw her, she was a little girl—happy, chubby, beautiful. The woman in the picture—she's skeletal, with this haunted look in her eyes." He paused. "But they're my wife's eyes. He's given me notes too—angry, full of pain, still blaming me, not wanting to see me. But she needs money. So I've given him some, several times. Just small amounts—I don't know if it's really my daughter, you see. And I don't have much to spare."

"But you were a CEO," I said. "You eat out, you pay with hundred dollar bills."

He smiled ruefully. "My second wife ran through most of my money while we were married, took the rest as a divorce settlement. At least she didn't get my car; I fought hard for that. I eat at Chez Cubbe to be around people. If I take my roll home for breakfast the next day and save my sandwich for lunch, I can manage on twenty dollars a day. The hundred dollar bills—that's the vanity of an old man who used to be rich. Every week, I take my change to the bank, add what's necessary from my Social Security check, and get a fresh stack of hundred dollar bills. It keeps me from looking pathetic."

The professor looked up from the manicotti she was threading. "And, I imagine, it gets you better service at Chez Cubbe."

"What?" he said, startled. "Oh. But the people there are so kind anyway that—"

"People who rise to the level of CEO," the professor observed, "generally do not do so by relying on the kindness of strangers. Have you shared what you've told us with the people at Chez Cubbe? Does anyone there know about the loss of your fortune?"

"No," he said. "And I'm trusting you not to tell them. They respect me—they obviously think I'm eccentric, but they think I'm a success. They tell me about their little hopes and dreams, they ask for advice. It's one of the few comforts I have left."

"And you've never told any of them," the professor persisted, "about your affair, and your estranged daughter, and the reason for Carson's visits?"

He hesitated. "My infidelity was the worst mistake of my life," he said at last. "It's nothing I would brag about, and nothing I would ever be a party to again."

Miss Woodhouse toyed with a pencil, tapping its eraser against her palm. "Will you give this information to the police?" she asked.

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"If I did," he said, "they'd look for Amy—if it *is* Amy. They might find her, and that might endanger her life. I'm hoping you can find her first. I can't pay much, but—"

"Payment is not an issue," Miss Woodhouse said. "I'm committed to investigating this case. If I fail to resolve it quickly, however, I'll insist on involving the police."

Reluctantly, Howard agreed. After he left, the professor insisted I take a nap. By then, my car had appeared in the driveway—Miss Woodhouse must've had someone drive it over from the waffle house—so I drove home, eager for some time to myself.

I didn't get it. Climbing the stairs to my apartment, I was absorbed in the task of shuffling through the bills that had stuffed my mailbox, deciding which had to be paid right away, which could safely be put on hold. I opened the door, stepped inside, and saw Stanley Carson standing in the middle of my living room, pointing a gun at me.

"Don't make a noise," he said, "or I'll shoot."

A gunshot would also make noise, but it probably wouldn't be tactful to point that out. I nodded. At the moment, it was the maximum response I could muster.

Seeming reassured, he lowered the gun to a less menacing angle. "It wasn't me," he said. "I didn't kill that guy—that David Cubbe—and I didn't knock you out."

"Your fingerprints were on the statue," I said. "On the iron lion cub chef."

"On the—was that what killed him? One of those centerpieces from the restaurant? His head didn't look bashed in."

It sounded innocent. It could have been a quick-witted response, but he didn't seem like a quick-witted guy. "It's not what killed him, but it's what knocked me out."

"Then somebody used it to frame me," he said. "Do I look dumb enough to leave behind something with my prints on it?"

Actually, he did. But I probably wasn't the only one who had noticed him fiddling with the statue; somebody could've swiped it and planted it at the scene to incriminate him. "When you came out of the waffle house," I asked, "did you see anything?"

"I heard something," he said. "I was coming out the back door when I heard this yelp in the parking lot. And I heard Cubbe yell something like, 'What did you do? Are you nuts?' Then there was a moan, and a thud. I waited a few minutes, too scared to move, then went out into the lot. There you were—you and him, next to the dumpster."

"So you called the cops," I said. "But you ran. Why? That made you look guilty."

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"I know," he said. "But I've had bad experiences with cops. Whenever I've tried to talk to them, they've never believed me, not once."

"Were you telling the truth those other times?" I asked.

"Well, no," he admitted. "But even so. They coulda been more trusting."

I let that pass. "Well, I believe you. My boss will too—she's thought all along that someone's framing you. Any ideas about who?"

"Someone from the restaurant, maybe," he said. "Nobody there likes me—I could tell. Especially that waitress, Brenda. I don't think she liked seeing me get friendly with Howard. I think she's got her eye on him—she's always real flirty with him."

"But he's old enough to be her grandfather," I said. Still, years ago, Howard had left his wife for a younger woman. Maybe he had a chronic weakness. Another thought hit me. "How did you get in here? How did you know where I live?"

"Credit card got me in. That's a real crummy lock. And I got your address from a friend who works at the hospital they took you to last night. Don't ask me her name—I'm no snitch." He stepped forward. "I said what I had to say. You're the detective—you figure out the rest. Guess I'd better tie you up now, so you can't call the cops."

With some effort, I convinced him that would be too melodramatic. I couldn't get him to turn himself in, though. So we compromised: He'd leave, and I'd count to three hundred before calling anyone. We shook on it, he left, and I counted.

"An interesting encounter," Miss Woodhouse said when I called her. "You still need rest, though. Come here at six. We'll have dinner and decide what to do next."

Rest didn't come easily—too many theories crowded my mind. I dozed jaggedly, snapped awake before the alarm clock buzzed, knocked on the Woodhouses' door at six sharp, and spilled out my suspicions while the professor ladled out chili.

"I think it's Brenda," I said. "I think she killed Little Dave."

"Indeed?" Miss Woodhouse said, passing the onion muffins. "And I have some new evidence that might support that theory. But tell us your thoughts first."

"Well, you'd figure a murderer would try to arrange some kind of alibi," I said. "Chuck and Terry didn't bother. Brenda stayed at a bar until two A.M.—judging from Chuck's reaction, that isn't something she'd usually do on a Thursday. And she seemed eager to tell us about her alibi this morning. But the alibi doesn't cover the actual time of the murder—unless the police found a witness who can put her at the bar before eleven."

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"Not yet," Miss Woodhouse said. "They're still looking."

"So she *could* have done it," I said, "and run to the bar and then gone home."

"She would have had to work in a stop at Chez Cubbe," the professor pointed out, spooning sautéed olives onto my plate, "to put the Minute Marinator in the dishwasher."

"That'd be easy," I said. "She said her apartment's near the city dock—that's close to the restaurant. She could wait till she'd talked to the police, then go back to Chez Cubbe and get rid of the marinator. The police weren't thinking of her as a suspect, so they probably didn't search her, right? And she must have a key to the restaurant—she came by this morning without calling first to make sure Chuck was there to let her in."

"Chuck has a key too," Miss Woodhouse observed. "So does Terry, obviously. And they both live within minutes of the restaurant, which is in a rather isolated spot. Any of the three might have judged a quick trip to Chez Cubbe a reasonable risk. But continue with the case against Brenda. What motive did she have?"

"Ambition," I answered. "She wants to be a celebrity, but she hasn't gotten a break. Maybe she's been looking for shortcuts, for someone who could rent a theater for a one-woman show, manufacture her designs, whatever. Little Dave might've looked like a good prospect: He owned a restaurant, he probably had cash—"

"He didn't," Miss Woodhouse cut in. "I checked. He was in debt. The restaurant was his only asset, and it lost money every month."

"Oh." That stumped me, but only for a moment. "Maybe Brenda didn't know that. Or maybe she'd found out recently, and that made her decide Howard looked like a better prospect—a supposedly wealthy old man with a fondness for younger women."

"And you think Brenda knew about this fondness?" the professor said.

"Maybe Howard told her his story," I said, "to get her sympathy. When you asked him, he was quick to say he hadn't told anyone at Chez Cubbe about losing his money. But when you asked if he'd told them about other things, he hedged—he just said he'd never brag about his infidelity or do anything like it again. With Brenda, infidelity wouldn't be an issue—Howard's single now, and so is she."

Miss Woodhouse smiled quietly. "Good observations," she said. "Sound logic."

I flushed—she doesn't hand out many compliments. "Then Stanley Carson comes along," I said. "That's got to make Brenda nervous. If Carson can get Howard together with his daughter,

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Howard might give his money to Amy, not Brenda. So Brenda's first scheme is to hire you and have Carson roughed up. When you say no, she decides to get rid of both Carson and Little Dave. If she's going after Howard, dumping Little Dave could be awkward: He might get mad enough to tell Howard she's been stringing them both along. So Brenda gets Little Dave to help her in some plan to scare Carson off. I don't know how she'd talk Little Dave into that—"

"Perhaps by promising to split Howard's fortune with him," the professor suggested. "Little Dave needed cash more desperately than Brenda did. Perhaps Brenda persuaded him she'd use Howard just long enough to secure his money, then give Little Dave all he needed to save his restaurant—and renovate it."

"That's right," I said. "Little Dave was broke, but he was planning this big renovation. He must've been hoping to get cash from somewhere—probably, from Howard. No wonder he agreed to go along with Brenda's plan."

"If you're right," Miss Woodhouse said, "the plan was to put a gun into your allegedly unsteady hands and scare you into killing Carson. But Brenda double-crossed Little Dave, killing him instead. That would explain what Carson overheard. It's plausible. But we have no real proof. The police did, at my request, check Brenda's phone records. Last night, she received a 10:26 call from Little Dave's cell phone."

"That fits," I said. "It practically proves those two were conspiring."

"Practically—but not quite." Miss Woodhouse stood up. "Mother, I must ask you to excuse us. I think Harriet and I had better have a talk with Brenda."

When we got to Brenda's apartment building, we saw a row of four rusting metal mailboxes lying on the foyer floor. Miss Woodhouse gazed at the battered security door.

"Someone might have ripped the mailboxes from the wall and thrown them against the door," she said. "But the door didn't give way." She pressed the buzzer for Brenda's apartment several times, then stood back, aimed a precise, powerful kick at the security door, forced it open, and took out her gun. "Keep behind me," she said.

She had to kick open the door to Brenda's first-floor apartment too. As instructed, I kept behind her, but even so I saw the devastation immediately—drawers dumped out onto the floor, sofa cushions slashed open, clothes ripped from closets. Then Miss Woodhouse took a step forward, and I saw the worst of it—

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Brenda, still in her black raincoat, crumpled facedown on the floor. A few feet away from her lay a small gun. I cried out and rushed to kneel by her side, to feel uselessly for a pulse.

Already, Miss Woodhouse had checked every corner of the tiny apartment. Sure we were safe, she called 911 and walked over to the broken kitchen window.

"We're supposed to think," she said, "that a burglar broke the window, climbed in, and searched for valuables. When Brenda came home unexpectedly, the burglar panicked and shot her. But what burglar slashes sofa cushions? Don't touch anything, Harriet, but look around. The thing the killer was looking for might still be here."

Unlikely as that seemed, I did as told. Brenda's purse sat on the kitchen table, its contents spilled out. I crouched down to look at a thin sheet of yellow paper emblazoned with a bank logo and called Miss Woodhouse over.

"Look," I said. "A receipt for a safe deposit box, dated today."

"Interesting." Miss Woodhouse reached into her own purse and took out a list of names and phone numbers. "Call them all, quickly—Terry, Chuck, Howard. Let's see who has an alibi this time. Don't tell them about Brenda."

Seconds before the police arrived, I finished the last of the calls. "Terry's at home," I reported. "I couldn't reach Howard. No answer at Chuck's apartment, but I got him on his cell—he's in his car, he says, on his way to Terry's house."

"Then we'll go there too," she said, "as soon as we finish with the police."

We finished more quickly than I would have thought possible. When Detective Barry Glass arrived, just minutes after the first uniformed officers, Miss Woodhouse took him aside, speaking to him urgently. He nodded and we were free to leave.

She drove the short distance to Terry's house, so absorbed in thought that I hesitated to speak. "Do you still think Brenda murdered Little Dave?" I ventured at last.

"I never said I *did* think that," she said sharply. "*You* thought that. But no, I don't think she did. I think they were both murdered by the same person."

"But why?" I said. "Who'd want to kill Brenda?"

"Figure it out," she said, her eyes hard on the road. "Think about the way Brenda acted when she first came to the restaurant this morning, about how her manner changed after she came back from the office. Think about the questions she asked you. And think about this: If Little Dave and Brenda weren't plotting a murder together, why did he call her at 10:26? Why did she then go to a bar and stay ridiculously late?"

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I had maybe two minutes to try to sort it all through before we arrived at Terry's. A red Escort I recognized as Chuck's was parked out front, and a classic Mustang was pulling into the driveway. We got to the front door moments behind Howard.

"Good to see you," he said, not looking like he meant it. "I'm here to—well, pay my respects. I'm not a personal friend, of course, but in view of the tragedy, I—"

Terry cut his fumbling short by opening the door. "Howard! What a nice surprise! How considerate of you!" she said, then saw us and grimaced. "Again?"

"We have news," Miss Woodhouse said. "May we?"

Standing aside with an air of aggrieved resignation, Terry let us enter the beige-on-beige living room. Chuck sat on the sofa, slumped and brooding; Howard hesitated a moment before sitting next to him. We remained standing.

"I have bad news," Miss Woodhouse said, managing to keep her eyes on all of them. "I apologize for announcing it so abruptly. Brenda has been murdered."

Terry gasped and put her hand to her mouth; Chuck just stared numbly; Howard looked instantly ready to cry. "Little Brenda?" he said. "Oh no. No."

"How did it happen?" Terry asked, her eyes downcast. "Where?"

"At her apartment," Miss Woodhouse said. "It seems she was shot by a burglar."

Chuck looked up. "At her—but I was there. Not an hour ago—I was there."

"Indeed?" she said. "You went into her apartment? You spoke to her?"

He shook his head. "No. She called this afternoon and said she'd come by the restaurant at six. I made dinner for her—a special dinner. When she didn't show up, I was steamed, so I went by her place, and I rang the damn buzzer again and again, and—oh God! I didn't know—I didn't know!"

"You ripped the mailboxes from the wall, didn't you?" Miss Woodhouse said. "And threw them against the security door? Then what did you do?"

He wiped his eyes briefly. "I called Terry on my cell, to ask if I could come pay my respects." He looked down at the carpet. "I thought maybe Brenda was here."

Terry had gone to stand by Howard, to put a hand on his shoulder. "She had a first-floor apartment," she said. "That made her an easy target. It's happened before."

"Yes, a few months ago," Miss Woodhouse said. "Brenda spoke freely about that yesterday—and about the little gun she bought

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to protect herself and kept next to her bed. That's probably the gun the murderer used to kill her."

"A terrible irony," Terry said, sighing heavily.

Chuck looked up sharply. "The cops are sure it was a burglar?"

"The apartment was certainly burgled," Miss Woodhouse said. "Ripped apart, in fact. And I'm sure some things were taken. Possibly, the person who took them has not yet had time to dispose of them—especially if he or she was forced to return home sooner than planned. When you called Terry, Chuck, did you call her home number?"

"I tried that first," he said, looking puzzled. "When that didn't work, I tried her cell and she answered. Why?"

"It's good to know these things," Miss Woodhouse said. "And you should all know that Detective Barry Glass is even now dispatching police officers to your homes, to make sure no items taken from Brenda's apartment are removed." She turned to face me. "Have you figured it out yet? You had the motive nearly right, didn't you?"

"But the wrong murderer," I said. "I knew Howard had a weakness for younger women. I should've realized that now that he's seventy, Terry's a younger woman too. So she could be the one with a reason to see Carson as a threat—and Little Dave as an obstacle."

Terry's indignation was instant and fierce. "Will you stop this ridiculous speculation," she said. "How dare you imply I had anything to do with my husband's death. I was at the restaurant when David was killed. And I'd begged him not to follow Miss Russo. Chuck heard me—I *ordered* David not to go."

"Yes—and for perhaps the first time in his life, he stood up to you," Miss Woodhouse said. "That uncharacteristic defiance should have told me immediately that the argument was staged. Harriet, what about Little Dave's 10:26 call to Brenda?"

"I'd guess he called to brag," I said, "to say he and Terry were getting rid of Carson. He probably wasn't explicit, just dropped hints to impress Brenda by making it sound daring and dangerous. But he probably just alarmed her—she figured he was doing something risky, so she'd better have an alibi handy, in case things went wrong and she had to prove she wasn't involved. That's when she headed for the bar. And when she heard about Little Dave's death, she knew Terry must have had something to do with it."

"Nonsense!" Terry said. "Insulting nonsense! I won't listen to any more."

She started for the kitchen, but Chuck jumped up to block her

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path. "Don't," he said, his face rigid. "Take a seat, Terry. My God! If you killed her—"

A car door slammed outside; voices conferred. The police had arrived. "There's no time left, Terry," Miss Woodhouse said. "No time to hide whatever you took from Brenda's apartment. You didn't find what you were really looking for, did you? Brenda wasn't bright enough to realize it's dangerous to blackmail a murderer, but she wasn't foolish enough to hide the evidence in her apartment. She put it in a safe deposit box."

"I'd figured out that much," I said, frowning. "But what *is* the evidence?"

The doorbell rang. Miss Woodhouse smiled at me before answering it. "Think of the black raincoat Brenda left in the office last night. Think of how convenient it must have looked to a murderer eager to find a quick disguise. Think of what deep pockets the raincoat has, of how many small stolen objects they might hold, and of the odd questions Brenda asked you this morning after coming back to the kitchen. And hope, just hope, that you might soon be able to return that brooch my mother lent you."

The brooch had been stuck to the lining of the raincoat pocket, thanks to that stubborn clasp that never closes properly. Terry must've been in such a hurry to dispose of evidence and get home that she missed it when she went back to Chez Cubbe to return the raincoat and toss the Minute Marinator in the dishwasher. But Brenda found it the next morning and tried to blackmail Terry with it and died because of it.

The police found other evidence, too, most of it tied to Brenda's murder, not Little Dave's—the pieces of costume jewelry Terry took from Brenda's apartment and desperately tried to grind up in her garbage disposal, half a dozen other stolen items stashed behind a wheelbarrow in Terry's garage. Except for the brooch, the things Terry took from Little Dave and me weren't found—she'd had more time to get rid of those, and she'd done a better job. But there was the note Brenda left in the safe deposit box, describing the call from Little Dave, her discovery of the brooch, and Terry's promise to give her half the money from the sale of the restaurant if she kept silent. Poor Brenda. It makes sense to take precautions to protect yourself from a murderer. But if you don't tell the murderer about the precautions—well, what's the point?

Terry's denying everything. But Miss Woodhouse's friends at the prosecutor's office have given us enough hints to let us piece the story together. It's a pathetic, sordid story—four people devoting

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three solid years to scheming with and against each other, all chasing the mirage of an old man's money. Chuck was the most straightforward, just trying to dazzle Howard with his cooking and convince him that opening a restaurant with Chuck as chef would be a good investment. If Howard had really been a wealthy recluse, rather than a retiree with an income stretched so thin he'd never turn down free food, Chuck might've succeeded. Brenda apparently tried a variety of unsuccessful tactics, from seduction to fraud, until Little Dave persuaded her he was inches away from getting Howard's fortune and would share it with her in return for the usual favors.

As for Little Dave's approach—evidently, it had been to use his wife to get Howard's money. Soon after the murders, Howard admitted to us that he'd carried on a flirtation with Terry for years. He thought her husband knew nothing about their secret meetings, but I'd bet Terry had Little Dave's blessing. She'd often tried to escalate the flirtation to an affair, Howard said, but his shame about his past wouldn't let him destroy someone else's marriage. Besides, if Terry got too close to him, she might discover the truth about his finances. Howard obviously preferred things as they were—keeping them all dangling, seeming to make half promises from time to time but never delivering, enjoying the feeling of being an important, sought-after man again.

Then Stanley Carson came along. Terry was probably the only one who knew the full truth about him—Howard confided in her, and she'd undoubtedly followed Carson to learn his Thursday night routine—but all four of Howard's suitors considered him a threat. We guessed at the rest. Terry, convinced Howard would never have an affair with a married woman, resolved to become a widow; she talked Little Dave into some plan to kill Carson or scare him off; she orchestrated a phone call I was supposed to overhear, so she'd have an alibi; and then she jumped from behind the dumpster, knocked me out, and sank the Minute Marinator into her husband's neck. It was a hairbrained scheme—but if it hadn't been for the computer map in Little Dave's pocket, his call to Brenda, and the stubborn clasp on the professor's brooch, it might have worked.

Terry had owned Chez Cubbe jointly with her husband, so there were no inheritance delays. To cover legal fees, she had to sell at a loss—to Chuck, together with two long-time customers eager to keep their favorite restaurant open. The notoriety from the murders was good for business, and word of Chuck's sauces spread quickly. Several months later, when the Woodhouses and I decided to have dinner at the restaurant, we had to wait forty

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minutes for a table. Anne—the only employee left from the old days—was our waitress. She let Chuck know we were there, and he came out to greet us.

"Nice and bustling, isn't it?" he said. "And we got big renovations planned. Not those retro plans Little Dave drew up. Our designer wants to give the place more of a bistro feel—traditional but trendy, minimalist but opulent."

"Sounds great," I said. Glancing around the crowded dining room, I spotted first one familiar figure, then another. "Oh gosh—there's Howard. And isn't that Stanley Carson? And that very thin woman—is she Howard's daughter?"

Chuck's nose crinkled. "Yeah. They been coming here every night for weeks. Howard told me a long, boring story about it—his daughter was hiding from some creep with a weird name, but then some cop named Glass pulled a joint sting operation with the Baltimore police, and now the creep's headed for prison and Howard's back with his daughter. And with Carson—him and the daughter are engaged. Howard hinted about having the wedding reception at Chez Cubbe. As if! He couldn't manage our prices."

The professor took a slow sip of water. "Perhaps you could give him a special rate. He has a long history here."

"Yeah, well, he should be history here." Chuck snapped his fingers. "Anne! Stop refilling water glasses at table twelve. And hound them every two minutes—let me get this plate out of your way, may I box that up, do you want to see the dessert menu, here's your check. You know the drill. Move 'em along." He waited for her to walk away, then shook his head. "God, she's slow. I'm giving her notice tonight. And she's too tolerant of Howard and his crew. All they ever order is soup and sandwiches and one drink each, and they sit around forever. We can't afford to put up with that kind anymore—we need the table. Well, enjoy your dinners. And tell your friends."

"So Howard's losing his haven," I said after Chuck left. "That's too bad."

"Let's hope he'll build himself a truer sort of haven," Miss Woodhouse said, "with his daughter and her new husband—a haven based not on deceit and false hopes but on openness and true affection."

Professor Woodhouse gave her daughter a disdainful look. "Openness and true affection! Please do not assault my sensibilities, Iphigenia, by indulging in such blatant sentimentality. I should hope I raised you better than that."

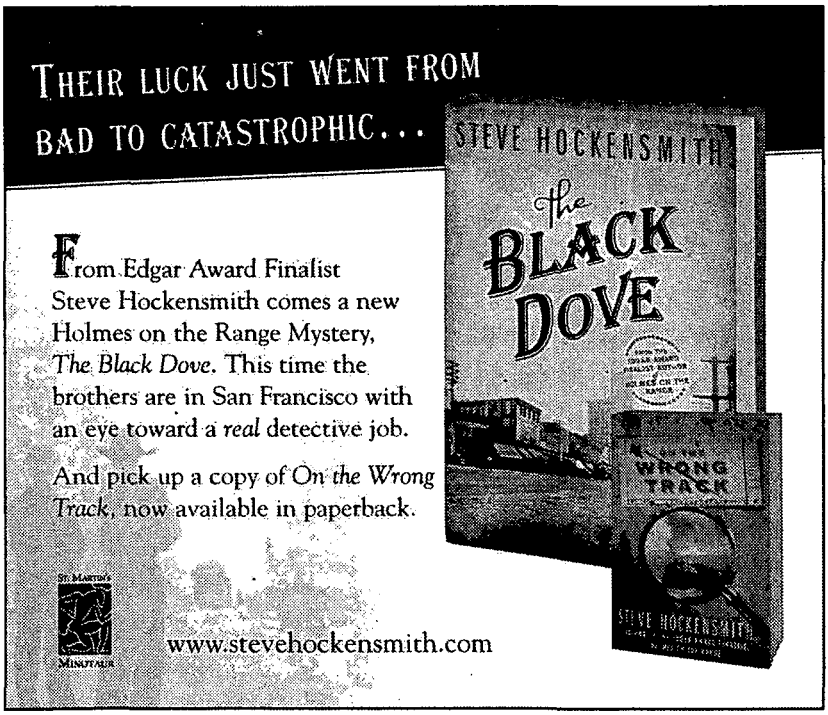
Miss Woodhouse cast her eyes down. "You're right, Mother. I'm sorry."

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"You should be," her mother snapped back, "you nasty girl. Besides, as I should not need to point out, Howard is not guiltless in all this. He knew what he was doing. Toying with people's dreams—that's a dangerous business, and a cruel one."

"True," I said, sighing. "I guess no one involved in this case is admirable; I guess I shouldn't be surprised. But when Terry and Brenda and Chuck first came to our office, they seemed so unselfish, so kind. I should've seen through it, even then. Private detectives are supposed to be cynical; I was naïve. I guess I just wanted to believe people really can be that—well, that *good*."

The professor glanced at me, then at her daughter. Miss Woodhouse still gazed down at the table, her eyes still dull with shame. Her mother reached out, just briefly, to touch her hand. "You may continue to believe in that goodness, little Harriet," she said softly. "But you must look for it in the right places."



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PICKLED ZILLIONAIRES

GARY ALEXANDER

Vladimir Illyich Larionov was an unemployed Russian scientist. Moscow's Research Institute on Biological Sciences had let him go for lack of work. Then the Institute itself shrank to a skeleton staff that subsisted on donations. Larionov was bemoaning this in a Veracruz bar to a California orthodontist who wished the guy would just shut up.

Dr. J. D. (Wally) Stockwall sipped his beer and said, "Downsizing. It happens."

Larionov was not sipping his vodka. He was drinking it like water. "Of course I am lucky to be alive. Those crazy Cubans."

Stockwall was preoccupied. He'd had financial reverses and couldn't afford this Mexico vacation. The only way he could conceal from his wife that they couldn't afford the trip was by taking it, although in a perverse way they could. Dr. Stockwall's malpractice insurance carrier had abruptly canceled him. Termination was instigated by an unfortunate incident that prompted an obscenely slanted article in a professional journal entitled "Orthodontics and Gangrene: A Link?" Unbeknownst to Sally Jo Stockwall, they were traveling on this month's premium.

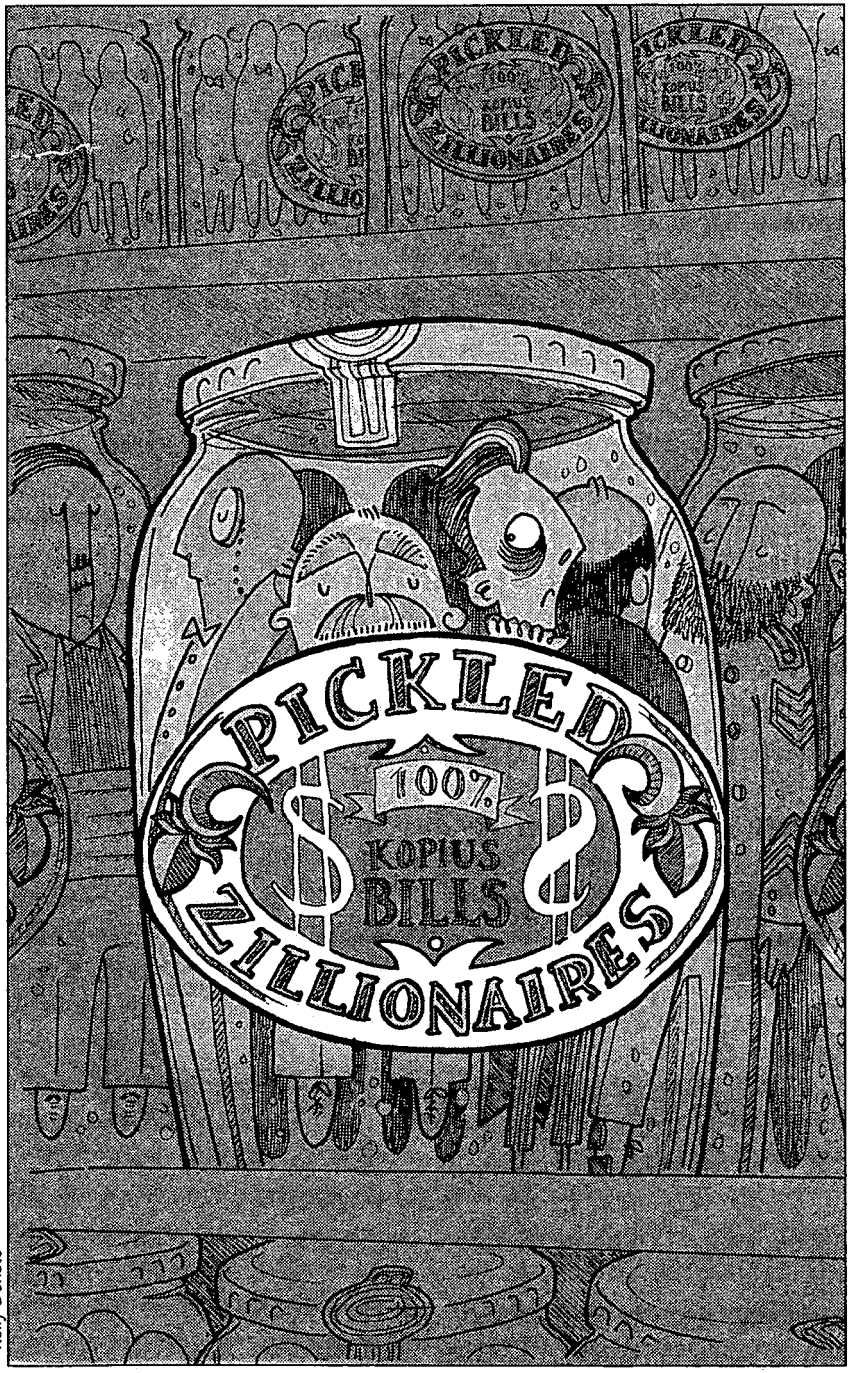
Their airplane to Cancún had blown an engine and made an emergency landing at Veracruz. A replacement plane wouldn't be in until the morning. Now Dr. Wally Stockwall was in this ratty bar—swinging saloon doors, drunken locals, soccer blaring on the TV—listening to a crazed Russki, while Sally Jo pouted in the hotel room, furious that her husband had booked them on this cut-rate package.

"What Cubans?"

Larionov said, "They misunderstand. They say I go to Cuba to assassinate Fidel. Not so. I go because I love Fidel. He is Socialist giant. I go to be there for him when he die. I am lucky to escape and stow away on freighter to this city."

Larionov was of indeterminate age. He had wild, jittery eyes and

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hair that looked as if it was styled by a finger in a light socket. The orthodontist had swooned at his teeth—rotted piers in a fetid mudflat. He'd written a mental estimate of nine thousand dollars, plus kickbacks from a periodontist and an oral surgeon.

"What were you planning to do to Fidel?"

"Immortalize him so he lie in state for all eternity. His revolutionary spirit will never be extinguished."

"Like Lenin's Tomb?"

"The maintenance of my namesake, Vladimir Illyich Ulyanov—you know him as Lenin—and Uncle Ho, they are only remaining projects. That is why we were disbanded."

Stockwall snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute. You preserve dictators?"

"Crudely expressed, but correct."

Stockwall's mind began churning. Imprudent investments had exacerbated his financial woes. His typical venture was as hopeless as a get-rich-quick-in-real-estate infomercial hustle.

"So with the collapse of Communism, your customer base is zilch."

"I do not know Zilch. Who is left but Fidel, I ask you?"

The last of the old-school Commies, Stockwall thought.

"Easy, easy," he said. "This thing you do to the corpses, is it embalming or what?"

Larionov drained his vodka and snorted. "Ordinary funeral embalming is child's play. We create masterpiece."

Stockwall signaled the bartender for another round and asked, "Have you ever considered the private sector?"

"Some colleagues desire to sell service. I say no. What we do is sacred."

Stockwall gave him a business card. "Like you, sir, I am a man of science."

Larionov read: DR. J. D. STOCKWALL. GENTLE CARING ORTHODONTICS.

Balding and pear shaped, Wally Stockwall was thirty-seven years old. He owned a cramped clinic in a Van Nuys strip mall, sandwiched between a dry cleaner and a teriyaki eatery. Soy sauce and solvents were imprinted in his nostrils.

He said, "I'm next door to Beverly Hills. I straighten the teeth of the stars. Please don't ask for names."

Larionov drank his vodka. He did not ask for names.

"I'd like you to license me your process."

"No."

"How're you doing for money?"

Larionov stared into his vodka. "I sleep in alley. I rely on generosity of strangers."

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Stockwall slipped a one dollar bill under his coaster. "Always glad to help."

Larionov nodded. "Am grateful."

"Comrade, do you know what the good life is?"

"Good life." Larionov fluttered a bony hand. "Good life is for officials and Mafia and capitalist running dog."

"The good life is for you too. Ever been to Cancún?"

"No."

"Cancún is sun and fun, and you're invited as my guest. You'll have a blast."

"Why invite?"

"It's a chance for you to relax and rethink ideologies. The potential of what we're talking about here is unlimited."

"Is kind of you, but—"

Dr. Stockwall got up and slapped Larionov on the back. "Outside the hotel next door. Nine A.M. You won't regret it."

Sally Jo Stockwall sat on the bed, TV remote in hand.

"Where've you been, Wally? You said you were going out for one drink."

Sally Jo Stockwall was a thirty-five-year-old former dairy princess from Washington State. She had thick hips and a hardened baby face. Sally Jo had gone off to college to escape the farm and to snag a professional man. As her catch settled heavily beside her, a milking barn didn't seem such a horrible place.

"I've been making us rich. That's all."

"A familiar tune."

Dr. Stockwall smiled at a savage pie-throwing commotion and chuckled. "You're grouchy because Jerry Springer's voiced over in Spanish."

Sally Jo shut off the television and sighed. "You aren't going to give me any peace until I hear your spiel, are you?"

When he was finished, she said, "Well, I have to admit, it's more promising than computerized meat-cutting machinery."

"Automation to eliminate butchers and their outrageous union contracts," Wally reminded her.

"Too bad the software couldn't tell the difference between hogs and steers."

Wally shook an imaginary saltcellar above his arm. "Go ahead, sweetums, rub it in the wound as deeply as you want. Feel free.

"I'll cut a deal with my buddy at the mortuary across the highway. He'll do the dirty work after hours, but he'll never know what's in the fluid."

"My Uncle George who had the strokes, he was done by your

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buddy," she said. "At the funeral, he looked like he'd been stolen from a wax museum."

"This process is at an entirely other level. The clients will be under my close supervision every step of the way."

"You have all the answers. Who'd be your clients?"

"Zillionaires. Egomaniacal politicians. Anybody who yearns to be immortalized and can afford it. Don't you think a glass-topped casket would be a nice touch in a presidential library? We'll charge a half million, minimum. Plus scheduled maintenance. Franchises too. The sky's the limit."

"Show me the money," Sally Jo Stockwall said.

Larionov appeared at nine A.M. sharp. As the gaunt, shaggy Russian approached, Sally Jo Stockwall made a face and hissed at her husband, "What the hell is that?"

"I knew he'd be here. Commies have to eat too."

"Ick."

"Our golden goose, gumdrop. Make nice. Do you realize how long Lenin has been in Lenin's Tomb? In the photos, he looks like he's taking a catnap."

"I'll stay upwind of Rasputin, thank you."

Their vintage turboprop wobbled into the air, climbed above the Gulf of Mexico, crossed the northern tip of the Yucatán Peninsula, and deposited them at Cancún International Airport. The Stockwalls and their companion took a taxi through a warren of streets to a seedy walk-up hotel.

Larionov and the Stockwalls checked into adjoining rooms. Sally Jo made doubly sure the connecting door was locked and frowned out a flyspecked window. "Where's my beach?"

Wally winked and said, "Cancún City is where the smart money stays at a fraction of the cost of the Cancún hotel zone, lovey pie. The impoverished natives employed at the posh resorts reside in this quaint burg. All we have to do is slip on our trunks, hop a bus, and we're there lickety-split. In Mexico, the beaches are public domain."

"*You* are there lickety-split," Sally Jo said, aiming and clicking the remote.

"C'mon, kiddo, it's an adventure into the unknown."

Oprah miraculously materialized in English.

"Let me know what you discover, Captain Kirk."

Standing in the aisle, hanging on for dear life, Vladimir Illyich Larionov and Dr. J. D. Stockwall rode a crowded, speeding bus to a boulevard of high-rises. Wally could take or leave Cancún.

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Phantasmagoric from what he'd seen thus far, a blend of Disneyland, Waikiki, and Taco Bell. More bikinis than in an Avalon-Funicello movie. Drunken American college kids and humidity that wouldn't quit.

They got off at a hotel shaped like a mock Maya pyramid. Stockwall picked it at random on the basis of garishness and size. Leading Larionov through a chilled marble lobby, he pointed at the glass atrium, watching the disoriented Russian gawk at bougainvillea dripping from walkway railings.

He said, "Is this paradise or is this paradise? The good life exponentially. The promised land is a trite way of stating it, but if you have the wherewithal, why not? As a man of science, you're entitled to appropriate compensation. Luxury is a natural component of your advanced education and expertise. This is a new age, Larionov. It's acceptable to be rich, even in the former Soviet Union. Billionaire Russian plutocrats are a fact of life. Private property and wealth building are here to stay. This is the twenty-first century, my friend."

Dr. Stockwall was attired in too-tight dark slacks and a too-too-tight tangerine golf shirt. Larionov wore sandals, filthy argyle socks, red plaid trunks, and a Hard Rock Cafe T-shirt. The orthodontist's capitalist gobbledygook swirled over his head with a couple of persistent flies.

They passed through to the patio, a pool that looked to Stockwall as large as Lake Michigan, and the beach. A turquoise sea lapped against sand as white as granulated sugar. Stockwall took off his loafers and white socks and said, "Fun and sun. The quintessential good life."

"Never have big sun until Havana," Larionov said, squinting upward. "In Mother Russia, if you want to see water, you saw hole in ice. Is too warm for me."

"Likewise. Shall we retire to a shaded table at the patio bar for a libation? My treat."

By the time the blistering midday sun descended across the boulevard, Wally was out of cash. They were drinking on his plastic, vodka rocks for Larionov while Wally nursed beer. Larionov remained exasperatingly sober, but he was finally talking shop.

"Process is eternal. Vladimir Illyich is constant toil."

"Yes. Immortality certainly isn't easy. You alluded to scheduled maintenance."

"Must constantly monitor temperature and humidity. Must touch up twice a week by secret process. Every year or eighteen months, we study body and rub fluids on. We change suit of clothes as liquid seep and spot."

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"Outstanding," Stockwall said, thumbs up. "We're essentially incorporating a mandatory service contract into every job. It's a license to print money."

He lifted his beer bottle in toast. "To a world-class biological science that cannot fall extinct. It would be an unspeakable tragedy to mankind."

"We do for love," Larionov said, gulping his vodka.

"Yes, love." Wally framed his thumbs and forefingers. "A slogan comes to mind. 'Keeping the Dead Alive Since 1924.'"

Larionov sneered.

Stockwall threw up his hands. "You can't do for love if you've starved to death, comrade."

Larionov gazed into space.

Stockwall persuaded the Russian to join him for a walk on the beach. If Wally had to throw up, better there than here.

"A stroll clears your thought patterns," he said. "Allows for sharper analysis."

As they trudged in the sand, Wally upped the ante. "What do you think about relocating to America?"

"Me?"

"You."

"America?"

"I have important contacts who can resolve your visa and passport issues," he lied. "Face reality, Larionov. You're basically a man without a country."

"America?"

"I guarantee you a home and hearth, not to mention freedom," he went on. "I have a funeral director associate, a legend in his field. He'll provide us a professional venue. We'll pursue the estates of billionaires and politicians.

"We'll bid the jobs aggressively. We should be satisfied if the first assignments provide a modest profit. We'll be establishing ourselves. When we're in the chips, we'll immortalize your idols pro bono. Castro and that little North Korean kook with the funny hair. Whomever."

"What is bid?"

"Bid means to compete monetarily to perform a professional service. Don't think for an instant your former colleagues won't jump on the bandwagon once we hang out our shingle. With us lowballing initially and you as chief scientist, they won't be able to touch us in regard to either price or quality."

"Monetary bid is not right."

"Please don't be offended when I say efficient business models are not a strength of your culture. I strongly recommend leaving

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that end to yours truly. To get us out of the starting blocks in a timely manner, I recommend we relay your formula and application procedures to my funeral director associate so he can evaluate the solution and purchase ingredients."

"No."

"You and your *nyet* attitude. I'm at my wit's end, Larionov," he whined. "I'm being *reasonab—*"

Wally tripped over something at water's edge. The obstacle wore only swimming trunks and was spread-eagled flat on his face.

Wally got up and said, "Sorry, friend."

"No hear you."

"Passed out," Wally said in disgust. "These kids who come to Cancún to party can't hold their booze."

Larionov knelt and rolled him over. "Is dead."

Wally gaped in horror at a fair-skinned man in his early twenties, average weight and height, mouth open, goggle eyed. This was his first dead body. Dr. J. D. Stockwall had never lost an orthodontic patient.

"Shouldn't he be bloated?"

"No drown," Larionov said, probing him and sniffing. "Acute alcohol poisoning. In Moscow, in winter, people freeze solid on sidewalk."

Stockwall noticed an empty tequila bottle an arm's length from the corpse. "We have to notify somebody."

"Splendid condition," Larionov said, holding Wally by a cuff.

The dictator-preserver's eyes had had no definite color, but now they glowed banknote green.

Stockwall asked, "What are you suggesting?"

"Dentist, did not like your greed before I have raw material. Raw material change everything. Has been *so* long."

"Larionov, we aren't in Russia. Cancún is almost America. We can't."

"What is it in your nation you call a sample of what you sell? Large capitalistic consumer good?"

"A demo," Stockwall said.

"Demo?"

"Short for demonstrator."

Larionov hoisted the dead man's clammy wrist to his shoulder. "Hurry, take other arm. I brush sand off him."

"What on earth are you doing?"

"Demo," Larionov said, raising his burden to its knees. "We have demo."

Larionov and Stockwall walked their toe-dragging, head-lolling demo from the beach to the boulevard.

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"Too much tequila," Wally said to passersby, who nodded knowingly. This was Cancún.

As the Russian held the corpse in an awkward embrace, arms dangling over his shoulders, Wally hailed a taxi.

"Too much tequila," he said, their prize wedged upright between them in the back seat.

"*Sí*," the driver said. "*Muy mucho tequila.*"

In their hotel lobby, they shuffled by the desk. Wally grinned sickeningly and told the clerk, "Too much tequila."

"Excuse me, *señor. Uno minuto.*"

Oh no, thought Wally. Oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no.

"The gentleman is an extra guest?"

"Um."

"Extra guests are to be paid for, *señor.*"

"He'll be staying with Comrade—*Mr.* Larionov. Put it on my tab."

The clerk thumbed through his card file. "His name, please."

Name? A dead gringo. A gringo. Gringo. Greg. Greg the Gringo.

"Greg," Wally said.

"Greg what?"

"Uh, Greg Gregg. Two g's on the second Greg. Gregg."

The clerk duly recorded the extra guest. On the landing, a perspiring and panting Wally Stockwall said, "Larionov, should we be doing this? We need to be asking ourselves that question. At first blush, while creative and opportune, there is a substantial downside."

"Open door."

Wally fumbled with the lock, dropping the key twice. In Larionov's room, they laid Greg on the floor.

"Please, Larionov."

"Go to room to wife. We begin tomorrow."

Wally couldn't get out of there quickly enough.

Wally Stockwall awoke in the morning to a hangover and Sally Jo's snoring. Appalled by what he and Larionov had done, he lay there, eyes clenched, pleading to any deity who cared to listen to transform yesterday evening into just a hideous dream.

No miracle was forthcoming. Suppressing a groan, Wally slipped out of bed and quietly dressed as he decided how to proceed. They'd wait until nightfall and dump Greg whence he came. Larionov, the lunatic, Wally would ditch the rummy Bolshevik too and cut his losses. He realized he was not soaring on a fast track to a fortune, he was plummeting into poverty and jail.

He unlocked the connecting door and tiptoed through. The emaciated dictator-preserver sat cross-legged on the floor, wearing

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only the red plaid shorts. He looked like a deranged monk.

"Brr," Wally said.

Larionov gestured to the purring air conditioner in the window. "Powerhouse machine. Temperature like Mother Russia."

In bed, covered to the neck, was Greg Gregg the Gringo. His eyes and mouth were closed. Blissfully, Wally thought.

"Larionov, I've been thinking."

"Cannot sleep. I watch demo all night. Is young and fresh."

"What I've been thinking is the laws we've violated. I understand that religious issues, the sanctity of life and so forth, are abstract and inconsequential to a card-carrying Communist. While the general concept of this demonstrator is fine, execution is dicey."

Larionov gazed adoringly at Greg. "Can make him so we ship to America by United Service Parcel. Not worry."

"I can't stop worrying. You don't grasp the ramifications."

Larionov thrust a list at him. "Buy. Hurry."

Wally perked up. "The formula ingredients?"

"No. Generic. Makeshift, not ideal. Chemical be sent from Russia later. We get, we purge demo and revitalize. Hurry, dentist. Go."

The shaken Dr. Stockwall set out to comply, abundantly aware that he should have his head examined. He stopped for a breakfast of eggs and toast and beer. After his third *cerveza*, Larionov's position seemed less untenable. It behooved Wally to be open minded in the gray areas. Greg was unidentified, possibly unloved, a wretchedly unhappy alcoholic, vacationing alone to his ultimate oblivion. The risk could be mitigated. It wasn't as if they'd be showing their demo at flea markets.

At last, this might be his shot.

Wally found what Larionov needed. Fortunately, the merchants took plastic and the clerks spoke rudimentary English. From a pharmacy, he bought chemicals, funnels, and tubing of various diameters. The only compound he recognized was formaldehyde. A supermarket provided paper towels, soap, rubber gloves, trash bags, buckets, and vodka. Most alarming was his stop at a hardware store: industrial-duty needles, pry bars, twine, knives (boning, serrated, and cleaver), and, Lord help him, a small saw.

When Wally returned, his feet were as cold as the dictator-preserver's room. "I didn't like the way the druggist looked at me."

"Look, you say? Look? Not worry about look. I look at demo, his youth, his vigor. Cannot stop looking. Could be Vladimir Illyich in firebrand days."

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Greg wasn't in the bed. "Where is he?"
"Bathtub. Ready to be immortal. Come see."
"No thanks."
"Your wife at door, ask for you. I say no see you."
"Good."
"Go to her. I finish."

Sally Jo Stockwall wondered outloud where Wally had been. He said he'd taken a long, solitary stroll. "You were sleeping so soundly I didn't want to awaken you, lovey."

Despite him avoiding eye contact and smelling like a brewery, Sally Jo accepted his story. She even felt charitable toward Wally's stinky Russian golden goose. Some day, a Wally Stockwall scheme *had* to hit the jackpot. It was the law of averages. Why not pickled zillionaires?

For lunch the Stockwalls went to the Cancún Hotel Zone, which was a narrow island shaped like a 7. They ordered chips, salsa, beer for him, and a frozen daiquiri for her.

Sally Jo asked pleasantly, "What's new with your mad-scientist friend?"

"I'm working on him. He hasn't entirely changed his mind, but he's weakening. I'm making definite headway."

"I knocked on the common door earlier and he came unglued."

"Larionov has a lot on his plate, weighing the pros and cons. The profit motive is alien to him."

Sally Jo dipped a chip and said, "Well, I hope you settle this soon. We're not made of money."

Wally tried again to tally the number of crimes they had committed. Even if they got away with the offenses to date, how could they slip Greg through customs like souvenir pottery?

Would Sally Jo stand by him if he were arrested? Would she agree to false alibis and perjure herself as a loving wife should?

Wally's hangover was competing with his declining morning buzz. He gulped his beer.

"Take it easy, Wally. You'll make yourself ill."

I already am ill, he wanted to scream. I have never felt worse in my life.

"I'm okay, kiddo. Your concern is nonetheless appreciated."

"Something is wrong."

"Nothing, sugar pie," Wally said. "Nothing in the whole wide world."

At their Cancún City hotel, Sally Jo Stockwall took a nap. Two frozen daiquiris and she was drowsy. Poor girl, she couldn't han-

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dle any excitement. To a background of his wife's snoring, Wally slipped out and rapped lightly on Larionov's hallway door, thinking that he had to put an end to the loathsome insanity posthaste.

The Russian admitted Wally to an odor that was part chemistry lab, part butcher shop. He slumped queasily against the wall.

"Do not worry, friend," Larionov said, patting him on a shoulder. "Am done. Lovely, yes?"

Greg Gregg was, as before, under the bedding, as if counting sheep. Greg looked no different, but Wally knew better.

"Full garbage bags in bathtub," Larionov said. "Go to sea tonight. Does Cancún have shark? Barracuda?"

Wally pitched to the toilet. He came out sniffling, dabbing his face with a washcloth, and said, "Comrade, we have issues. We have, essentially, basically, an unworkable business plan. Immoral, if you're inclined to split hairs."

Larionov passed him the half-empty vodka bottle. "Drink. Good for digestion. Make you at ease."

"No thank you. We have to end this, Larionov. Terminate the project."

Larionov addressed him with melancholy, rheumy eyes. "End? What of my masterpiece? My opal magnum."

"Your opal what?"

"What you call artistic masterpiece."

"Magnum opus."

"Yes. Magnum opus! Is what I say."

"Larionov, this . . . creature isn't a symphony."

"Is superior to music," Larionov said.

"Regardless, it—he—has to go. I didn't think this out thoroughly. Mrs. Stockwall constantly chastises me vis-à-vis my investment strategies. I draw the big picture and falter on the details."

Greg Gregg the Gringo sat upright and said, "Ahhhhoooouuuu."

Wally yelped and crouched in a corner. Larionov clapped his hands and cackled. He kissed Greg on the chin and rearranged him in a covered prone position.

"Vladimir Illyich and Uncle Ho do same," he said. "Vladimir Illyich have flailing arms. Like punching you. Remember Georgi Dimitrov?"

"No," whimpered the orthodontist.

"Was Prime Minister of Bulgarian People's Republic. When reactionaries pull down Berlin Wall, they take Comrade Georgi out of case and bury him in ground. Like rubbish!"

Larionov shook his head in disgust and laughed again. "They tell me that in old days, Comrade Georgi once jump out of case and dance a jig."

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Wally gaped at him, horrified.

Larionov slapped his knees, giggling. "Scientist and technician, they gasp like have heart attack. What I would give to be there."

"Spare me the anecdotes. Explain to me in layman's terms what just occurred."

Larionov shrugged. "Difference in chemical purity, in concentration to what we use at Institute. Is spasm is all. Contraction of larynx and muscles. Tequila that kill him contribute. Formation of residual gases. Who can say?"

He wrenched Stockwall to his feet. "Come. Demo is anxious for us to buy him suit of clothes. Dark distinguished suit. Be presentable for America, the three of us, when we walk on airplane."

Dr. Stockwall trembled, chewing his nails.

Larionov howled. "Is joke, dentist. Research Institute on Biological Studies humor."

Wally was desperate. It was impossible to reason with the demented Red. He agreed to go clothes shopping for the corpse and they settled on a time after dark to remove the bags of offal.

Wally spent the day pacing malls, racking his brain. He gradually devised a plan. Rather than cloaking Greg Gregg the Gringo like a CEO, he selected casual wear. He'd noticed in his grisly shopping for Larionov that powerful drugs requiring a prescription in the U.S. were sold over the counter. At a *farmacia*, he bought sedatives and a liter of vodka. He rented a subcompact sedan.

At nightfall, Larionov and Wally lugged two black plastic bags downstairs to the trunk of the rental car. The Russian said, "Magnum opus not so heavy as when we go up stairs with him. Blood and bodily fluid wash down drain."

"Never mind."

Stockwall handed the laced vodka to the appreciative Russian and told him to enjoy.

The overdeveloped Cancún hotel zone had the Caribbean on one side, a lagoon on the other, and was linked to the mainland by short bridges. Only near the south end could Stockwall find a stretch of undisturbed land. Even in this slender break between hotels and condos, he could see construction cranes silhouetted against the sky like praying mantises.

He parked as close to the beach as he could and popped the trunk. "I'll be the lookout. Don't take all night."

Larionov was groggy from the vodka. Dragging the bags, furrowing the sand, the dictator-preserver weaved and staggered to water's edge. He untied the bags. Instead of emptying the contents into the sea, he rubbed his eyes and curled up in the fetal position.

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Damn, damn, damn, damn, Wally thought, backpedaling; I overmedicated. Five more minutes of consciousness and the gore would be fish food.

To complicate things, joggers approached. An insane activity, day or night, he thought. Dr. Wally Stockwall did not run unless he was being chased. Gasping for breath, he ran lurchingly to the car before that happened.

Driving to the hotel, he figured to get rid of Greg and give Sally Jo the bad news that he'd been called home for an orthodontic emergency, that they had to catch the next flight out.

Wally brought the clothes he'd purchased for Greg Gregg into Larionov's room. How he wished he could merely leave him, but both rooms were registered in his name. Prudence took precedent over squeamishness. He took a deep breath and threw off the bedding.

Sally Jo heard noises earlier in the stinky Russian's room, as she did now. She'd had her fill of Wally disappearing to play silly games with his crackpot pal.

She knocked, to no avail, so she unlocked the connecting door, opening it to her husband bending over a young sleeping man, who was buck naked except for a pair of shorts.

"Oh my God!"

Wally spun around. "Lovey, it isn't what it seems."

"He's so young. Did you slip him a Mickey Finn?"

"Sal. Angel pie."

"You're out of your sicko closet, admit it."

Wally spread his arms. "Honeybunch."

"I just *knew*."

"There is a plausible explanation, my precious."

"Pervert!"

Sally Jo slammed the door so hard the knob fell off. Dr. Stockwall listened to drawers banging and suitcases tossed about. He waited for the sound of his spouse's footfalls in the corridor. Then he dressed Greg in the shorts, sandals, and an I ♥ CANCUN T-shirt. Stitches sealed an abdominal incision. Wally did not dwell on the particulars of the slice.

Their erstwhile demo was astonishingly light. Greg wasn't as loosey-goosey as yesterday, either. Larionov had rendered him stiff, yet pliable. He could be molded at the joints like a mannequin. They labored down the steps, and Wally said to the clerk, who didn't move his eyes from his comic book, "Too much tequila, too much tequila."

With Greg Gregg securely belted in, Wally started the car. He saw flashing lights and swung around the block. *Policía* cars

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squealed to a halt in front of the hotel. Out of the back of one came two cops and Larionov. Presumably, the law had been summoned by the busybody joggers who took offense at the gore. Supporting the yawning Bolshevik, they (also presumably with his room key) entered the hotel.

Swell. Wally wondered where to go. Then he had a brilliant cerebral flash. Hide Greg Gregg in plain sight! If Wally went to an isolated locale, it would be his luck to be nabbed disposing of the body, a gutted and embalmed one at that. In the hubbub of Cancún nightlife he would be leaving an acquaintance to savor his extreme intoxication alone.

Then off to the airport and home to an uncertain future. But for now, Wally was optimistic.

On the main boulevard, he parked in a public lot adjacent to a shopping plaza. Darkness and decreased pedestrian traffic worked in his favor. Arm cinching the waist of his inebriated companion, Wally scuttled to a sidewalk bench. He informed potential witnesses with what was becoming a mantra, "Too much tequila, too much tequila."

They sat on the bench. Greg Gregg behaved admirably by staying vertical, although he leaned into Wally. This drew a raised eyebrow now and then, in a vein similar to Sally Jo's cruel accusation.

Loudly, Wally announced to Greg, "I'm going for coffee. A cup of java will perk you up. I'll be right back. Hang in there, guy."

"Marty!" screamed a young blond woman in a flowered sundress.

The woman crossed the street, dodging traffic.

Fists raised, she cried euphorically at Greg Gregg the Gringo, "Oh, Marty, Marty, Marty, you sweet lovable drunk. When you didn't return from your swim, we thought you'd drowned. We have the police out looking for you, you twit."

Oh so carefully, Wally stood.

"Excuse me, sir. Are you with Marty?"

"No, no. We were sharing a bench. Ships passing in the night, as it were."

"Does he look normal to you?" the girl asked. "He's not responding to me and his eyes are weird."

Wally continued to retreat. "Sorry. I don't know what's normal for him. Frankly, he may have had too much tequila. Too much tequila."

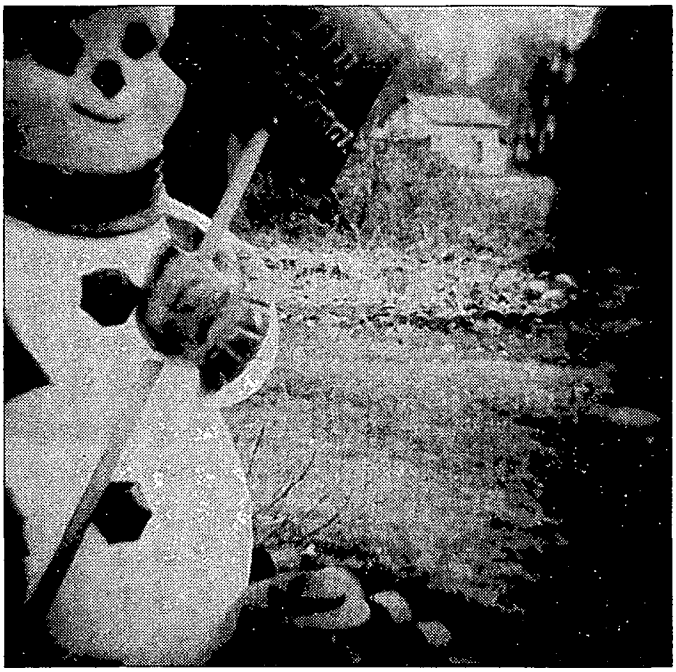
Greg Gregg lifted his head as if baying at the moon.

"Ahhhhoooouuuu."

Dr. Stockwall stumbled to his car. Burning rubber as he accelerated away, he could still hear the girl's shrieks.

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MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Julie Nevins/Graphistock

Unseasonal Greetings

We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "May Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 140.

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GANG OF THREE

JAS. R. PETRIN

"You realize," Robideau pointed out, "I'm not a peace officer anymore. I'm just filling in for Chief Butts until he gets back from his well-earned vacation. I don't have any official powers."

"But what we got here, Chief, is grand larceny, an' somebody's got to do somethin' about it!"

Ex-chief Robideau gazed up at the incensed Pete Melynchuk from the Scrabble board at the back of Tom Hedges's barbershop. Tom, often called Tomahawk Hedges for his inclination to give customers more than their money's worth, sat scowling over the last move of the game with his chin in his hand, struggling to find a word that would eliminate Robideau's narrow lead. Pete continued to stand over them, flinty eyed and hotly determined. Robideau sighed.

"Right. Let's have the details. Where exactly did this grand larceny take place? Where were you when the case of beer disappeared?"

Pete folded his arms and thrust out his jaw. The very picture of an injured citizen.

"Side of the road outside the Netley Hotel. I was in the pub all evening. Won the fifty-fifty draw, that's how I bought the beer. Set it down for maybe half a jiffy so's I could fish out the keys to my truck, an' when I turn around—gone! A whole two-four of Sleeman's Honey Brown!"

The ex-chief nodded. He did care about robberies, even the theft of a case of beer. Things like that shouldn't happen. Not here in End of Main. Here most folks didn't even lock their doors.

"Is 'yeiao' a word?" Tom Hedges asked.

"No," Robideau told him. He turned his attention back to Pete Melynchuk. "You shouldn't drive when you've been drinking," he cautioned sternly.

"Never touched a drop. Drank tea all evening."

"Yeah, right. This happened . . . ?"

"Like I said, last night. No, this morning. One A.M. Or something."

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"Cans or bottles?"
"Bottles."
"Any witnesses?"
"I just told you. Me."
"Any *other* witnesses?"
"Not a living soul."
"Meaning the street was deserted?"
"You could've fired a cannon."
"How about 'aioey'?" Tom asked.
"I don't think so," Robideau replied. He said to Pete, "Somebody must have been there. Somebody besides you."
"Nobody."
"What you're saying, then, is that this beer of yours simply vanished into thin air." Robideau shot a suspicious gaze at Melynchuk. "You're not trying to pull something here, are you, Pete? There really was a case of beer?"
"Chief! On my mother's eyes!"
" 'Eye'," Tom Hedges said. "Yeah, that works." He brightened, dropping the tiles in place. "Triple score for the *y*. Looks like I win, Chief. How about that!"

Robideau got in his car and drove the block and a half to the Netley Hotel. He could have walked it—should have—but winter had struck the town early. He hated winter. Hated it more with each passing year. He envied Butts, who was enjoying three weeks at a time-share out in the South Seas. He liked to imagine there was a place in the sun for him too. A little bungalow at the edge of a beach, ukulele music, and no phone. Definitely no phone.

He stopped in front of the Netley and got out near the spot where Pete claimed to have been parked. His boots crunched on a delicate coating of thin sleet, a frozen glaze on the light snow that had accumulated early last evening. He looked at the ground. A plow had been by, and a sanding truck, and a number of citizens heading to their jobs. No chance of footprints, that was for sure. Across the road stood Buzz Taylor's Seniors' Retirement Lodge, a slab-sided old frame structure rubbing shoulders with a row of shops. To his left the hotel parking lot, and south of that the hotel itself.

Last evening this would have been a noiseless scene, as peaceful as the open prairie. No way anyone could have crept up on somebody without that person knowing it. But Pete, on the other hand . . .

Pete insisted he hadn't been drunk. Of course he would say

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that. More likely he had staggered up to his truck, fumbling his keys out, and firing it up with the remote starter he had won at the Legion last fall—a lucky guy in many ways, Pete. The truck had scarcely any muffler. A one-man band could have marched past unnoticed. Then he would have spent a minute or two brushing snow off the windshield, a more likely reason to set the beer down on the ground. And the fluffy snow would have muffled any footsteps—

"Chief! Chief Robideau!"

—As for footprints, the state Pete must have been in, he wouldn't have thought to look for them—

"Chief!"

Robideau looked up to see Buzz Taylor beckoning to him from the top of the Lodge steps across the street, holding the door open and leaning out into the cold, his breath blossoming in vaporous clouds from his lips. "Got a minute, Chief?"

It was warm in Buzz Taylor's sitting room. A little too warm. The chief accepted the mug of black coffee pressed on him, drinking it in short sips to keep from burning his tongue. Amazingly, Buzz too had been robbed.

"My ice scraper, Chief. Big, heavy, steel job. Sixty bucks I paid for that thing. Always leave it by the front step, never know when I'm going to need it, chip the ice off the walk so the old ladies don't fall on their clavicles and sue me. Been leaving it there for years. Now, all of a sudden—poof! Gone!"

A case of beer and now an ice scraper. Practically a crime wave. What was going on in town?

"It's pretty bad when a man can't even leave his ice scraper beside the steps of his own house. Sixty bucks, Chief. What am I s'posed to do? Hire a rent-a-cop to sit there an' watch it for me?"

"It's only an ice scraper," Robideau reminded him, then realized instantly it was the wrong thing to say. Buzz launched into a venomous tirade on how this was the first step on the road to ruin. The thin edge of the wedge—or of the ice scraper, so to speak. "First the scraper, Chief, an' after that, bigger things. Steal the potted plants, then the screen door. Poleaxed in our beds next, if we let this kinda thing go by."

Robideau decided not to mention the beer.

"Have you talked to your roomers? Maybe one of them borrowed it."

"Are you kidding me? They're practically all a hunnerd years old. It'd take three of 'em to lift it—organized crime! And what would they want with it? They don't do a lick of work around

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here. I'm the one does the heavy lifting. All the rest of them ever do is complain. Like Mrs. Lumpenstetter." He switched to a sing-song voice. " 'Mr. Taylor, it's cold in here. Can't you turn up the heat?' Put your head into her apartment, Chief, see how cold it is. Gotta be a hunnerd friggin' degrees. Give you heat stroke. 'Mr. Taylor, my sink is plugged.' Mrs. Lump, you can't shove a chicken, three corn cobs, an' yesterday's *Free Press* down the disposal at the same time, you got to spread things out a bit." He gave his head a shake. "An' then there's the Gang of Three."

"The what?"

"My three losers. Culbertson, Highway, an' Brewster. I'm always runnin' around repairing the things they screw up. Those guys got the magic touch. Everything they touch turns to crap. Story of their lives, you ask me."

"But you talked to them?"

"Of course I talked to them. They never seen it."

Robideau finished his coffee. "I'll keep my eyes open."

"That'd be nice," Buzz Taylor said.

Heading back to his car, Robideau hadn't gone a dozen paces when Arney Arvelson trotted up behind him. Arvelson ran the co-op hardware and dry goods store down the street.

"Chief," Arvelson said, his distressed, owlish face tinged a mottled pink from the nippy air, "did you get my phone message?"

"Not if you left it in the last twenty minutes," Robideau said.

"You should have a cell phone."

"I do have a cell phone."

"Okay, but you don't forward your landline to it, do you? Called the office, your place there, and the machine came on, and all I got was your message. Said you were taking over for Chief Butts the next few days."

"What's all this about, Arney?"

His spectacles flashed.

"I've been robbed. What do you think of that?"

"I think there's a lot of it going around," Robideau said.

"I don't care what's going around, I only care about what happened to me."

Billy Highway turned from the window through which he had been peering nervously out at the street. Not that he could see much. The frost was so thick he'd had to melt a dime-sized peephole in it with his thumb. He seemed to be losing his nerve.

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"That was Robideau down there talking to Buzz," Billy said. "I'm surprised he didn't come upstairs and arrest us."

"Relax. The Buzzard don't know nothing." This exhortation came from Creepy Culbertson, sitting crosswise on Billy's narrow cot, bony shoulders flat against the wall, a bottle of Sleeman's Honey Brown clutched in one big-knuckled, arthritic hand.

"Why must you talk like that?" the third man, Alexander Brewster, demanded to know. A pale, pudgy man, with white hair curled around his ears, he was perched on Billy's only visitors' chair, an armless, wooden, straight-backed job with a spatter of paint stains on its lower spindles.

"One for all and all for one, right?"

"Talk like what?"

"Using double negatives. You sound just like a criminal."

"I am a criminal. So are you two guys, now. We're all criminals, so I might as well talk like one."

"I'm sorry we ever started this," Billy Highway admitted miserably. He had operated his own electronics repair shop years ago but lost it when he drank the profits away. He sank down on the windowsill, and the frost against his backside made him jump to his feet again. He had slivers back there from clambering over that pile of lumber last night.

"I remember correctly," Creepy Culbertson said, beginning to make a cigarette, "it was you that started it in the first place, swipin' that beer." He didn't bother to set down his Honey Brown as he did this, constructing the cigarette with one hand, always fascinating to watch. A pinch of tobacco nipped between brown-stained fingers, a cigarette paper tucked in the palm, then a deft twist, and his pink tongue flicked the glued edge. He popped one end of the smoke in his mouth. "Got a light?" The cigarette waggled when he spoke.

"You'll get me kicked out of here if Buzz Taylor thinks I'm smoking in my room," Billy told him crossly. With reluctance, he handed Creepy a book of matches. "You pinched the ice scraper."

"We needed it to open the window, didn't we? It was the beer got us all sittin' around here thinkin' last night, wasn't it?"

"Buzz Taylor—"

"The hell with Buzzard freakin' Taylor. You'll be able to buy the place after we pull this off. Kick him out an' run things yourself."

"*If*," Alexander Brewster remarked haughtily. "*If* is the opera-

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tive word." A precise man, a professor at M.I.T. once, so he said, and before his rapid fall from grace, an authority on valence electrons. Something to do with adding chemical signatures to high explosives for forensic investigators. He'd have won the Nobel Prize one day, he maintained when drunk, if it hadn't been for that business with the undergraduate, her husband's missing research papers, and that regrettable inferno in the lab. A plot, he said, to discredit him, which is why he'd been forced to drive a Zippy cab the last twenty years of his working life.

"I been meaning to ask you, Doc," Creepy said to him now, "you ever almost win any other prizes? Before the no-bell prize, I mean?"

"No," Brewster snapped.

"I get it. Sort of a one-shot deal. One of them lucky guesses or somethin'."

Brewster turned an indignant red, about to leap to a shrill defense setting forth all the painstaking study, experimentation, and intellectual brilliance required to reach that exalted pinnacle in the competitive world of research. Billy saw it coming and headed him off.

"Let's stick to the point, guys."

"What *is* the point?" the doc snarled.

"What we were discussing. How we got ourselves into this mess."

"You can call it a mess," Creepy Culbertson said. His grin seemed a permanent fixture. "I call it an opportunity. Our last chance to show folks they can't just write us off, three old-timers here in practically an old folks' home."

"It *is* an old folks' home," Billy corrected him.

"Our last chance," Creepy continued, "to show people we got to be taken seriously. An' our last chance to get rich, don't forget that little detail." *Rich*. They all liked the sound of the word. They looked on as Creepy leaned forward and dragged the fruit of their previous night's labors out from under the bed.

A hush fell over them. A meditative silence. The box of chemicals lying at their feet infused the sleepy old house with an air of menace.

"So what do we do now?" Billy Highway wanted to know.

Robideau stood with Arney Arvelson outside the cage at the back of the storeroom, Arney pointing out the wrenched-off hasp, the now useless padlock still dangling from it. He had already shown Robideau the forced window in the lumber room.

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"I always keep these things locked up," Arney said. "I'm not required to, but I do it anyway. These types of chemicals can be used in dangerous ways."

"To make explosives?"

"Yes. Exactly."

"Wouldn't it be easier for the thief to just go out and swipe the finished product?"

"You might think so. It's been known to happen, of course. But it isn't all that simple. Explosives are kept under tight control. Quantities are itemized and must be accounted for. Their chemical ingredients, on the other hand, are much easier to get hold of."

"I see that," Robideau said.

Arvelson made a tight sound down deep in his throat.

"Are you going to report this theft?" Robideau asked.

"I have reported it. You're here, aren't you?"

"I mean to whoever it is that keeps track of this stuff."

"Hello. I just told you. Nobody keeps track of it. I'm not even going to inform my insurance company. It's hardly worth it, too small a loss, and it might prompt those vampires to raise my premiums next time around." He swung the gate shut, and the iron frame whined. "I'm afraid you're it, Chief. I've done my duty."

"Thanks," Robideau said. "I think. Anything else missing?"

Arvelson gazed around with an air of defeat. "We carry thousands of items. I'll need some time to answer that one." As they walked to the door, he pushed his spectacles up higher on his nose. "I'm glad you're back on the job, Chief Robideau. I know the town will be safer for it."

"You know that, do you?"

"Absolutely. You've got a nose for trouble, Chief."

"I'm beginning to think so," Robideau said.

He took his nose around to the back of Arvelson's store, more to be professionally thorough than with the expectation of learning anything helpful. It was more or less as he had thought. Here too the freezing rain had obliterated any incriminating signs. A few scrapes in the sill and on the sash of the forced window were visible. That was all.

He was so caught up in thought he walked all the way to Butts's office before remembering the car and having to go back for it. At last, pulling off his coat and hanging it up behind the office door, he stood for a moment with his arms at his sides, feeling a mix of emotions. His first day back in the saddle and

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things were heating up. He glanced warily at the telephone, half expecting it to ring with the horrific news that some End of Mainer, high on beer and chemicals, had dismembered his neighbor with an ice scraper.

"It never rains unless it pours," he reminded himself. A maxim often quoted by Mrs. Robideau.

Sitting at the desk, he pulled pen and paper toward him and jotted down three words in firm block letters:

BEER
SCRAPER
CHEMICALS

He stared at the result, waiting for some neat and obvious connection to pop into his mind. Somebody with too much time on their hands steals some beer, gets drunk, and uses Buzz Taylor's ice scraper to break into Arney Arvelson's hardware store in order to steal . . . chemicals?

What for?

He considered the possibility that the crimes were unrelated, committed by different perpetrators, then quickly rejected the idea. In a larger community that would have been possible, even probable, but in End of Main it was hard to embrace the notion. Here, where practically everybody was a more-or-less model citizen and where one peaceful day flowed seamlessly into another, it just didn't seem credible.

The office chair was too low. He fiddled with the side levers but couldn't raise it any higher. Worn out, like everything else in the place. He sympathized with Butts, who had to run an effective operation on a shoestring. The town's public safety budget was regularly squeezed by vote-conscious councillors raiding it for their own pet projects; it was a wonder the chief had any office at all and wasn't expected to operate out of his car. He thought wryly about the TV show he had watched with Mrs. Robideau last night. It was one of her favorites, in which investigating officers had acres of high-tech facilities and experts of every description to assist them, and they were so flush with cash they drove around in Hummers, for crying out loud. Not here. Not in End of Main. Here, small-town reality ruled.

He looked at the words again, underscored them, then drew a circle around them. He hadn't noticed anything in particular. It just gave him a sense of accomplishing something.

"Nobody better get hurt," Billy Highway said.

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"They're not going to. We're going in on a Sunday, the place is deserted," Creepy Culbertson assured him.

"*I* could get hurt," Billy Highway reminded them. He jerked his head at the heavy mix of chemicals Alexander Brewster was preparing in the sink. "Some of that leaks down and gets stuck in the drain, I'll pull the plug one day and get blown to smithereens. They'll find pieces of me from Fargo to Nunavut."

"Where's Nunavut?" Creepy Culbertson asked.

"If you're here when it happens, you'll find out."

"There's nothing to worry about," the doc assured them crisply, "I know what I'm doing." He was bent over the kitchen sink wearing oversized, bright yellow pot-scrubbing gloves. Billy's pink embroidered apron bulged in an unseemly way around his pudgy midriff.

"Correction, Doc, you *used* to know," Creepy said. "Lotta water under the bridge since then." And addressing Billy again, "Ever see that movie *Fargo*? That's a good one. A laugh riot."

But Billy was more interested in what Brewster was manufacturing in the sink. *His* sink. "What I don't understand," he said, "is how you can make a proper explosive out of all that wet, mucky sludge."

"It's not sludge," the doc corrected him, "it's called a slurry. And stop carping. This is the way it's done. It's the same process used in factories, only there they have the benefit of automation and specialized equipment."

"I guess I'll have to take your word for it," Billy said.

"Thousands wouldn't," Creepy Culbertson remarked.

The doc rambled on.

"The usual active ingredient, $C_3H_6N_6O_6$—cyclotrimethylenetrinitramine—is virtually unobtainable, but I can assure you my own homegrown formula is superior in many ways, as are the binder and plasticizer I shall employ, both of which are innovations of my own." Brewster nodded at a milk jug filled with heating oil siphoned from the tank in the furnace room, then at several bars of lye soap on the countertop. "If my calculations are correct, and of course they most certainly are, we shall have about a pound and a half of product as good as anything procurable on the black market."

"But will it go bang?" Creepy asked.

"Of course it will."

"Reason I'm askin', we don't want it to foozle on us."

"If you mean fizzle, you can stop worrying right now."

"I'm even more worried," Creepy added, "like Billy here, that it might go off when it's not supposed to an' take my face with it."

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"That wouldn't be much of a loss."

"No, but it's my face."

"Look," Brewster shot back, bridling, raising Billy's mucky wooden mixing spoon in the air, "I'm attending to my part of this fiasco. Billy's seeing to his, scrounging things, leading us to the chemicals—good thing he worked as a sweeper in that store at one time, is all I can say. And we're relying on him to construct a triggering mechanism."

"I'll kludge something," Billy mumbled.

"And when our preparations are complete, it will be your turn, Mr. Culbertson. Your great moment of truth. Then we'll see what sort of felon you are. We'll see if you're up to the mark, the great safecracker you've made yourself out to be. Personally, I shall be surprised."

Creepy sniffed. "Fiasco, huh? The proof is in the pudding. That pudding you're concocting there. An' if it lets us down, I can't speak for the consequences."

There was a bold knock at the door. Billy went pale. The doc threw a tea towel over the muck in the sink and backed away, looking terrified and wiping his hands on his apron. Creepy shook his head at them both, laughed, and sauntered down the hall to the door.

He unlatched it, opened it partway, and greeted the caller jovially. "Well, hello there, Buzz. What can we do for you? Mrs. Winnafree wander off again, slathered in jam? You won't find her here. Billy don't like jam."

His voice boomed off the bare walls.

"I'm not here about Mrs. Winnafree," they heard Buzz say loudly. "I'm here about Mrs. Lump. I mean Mrs. Lumpenstetter. She says she thinks you boys are up to something. She believes you might be running a still in here."

Creepy laughed but kept his left hand tight on the doorknob, his right firmly locked on the jamb. "A still? What would Mrs. Lump know about stills? We were just gonna sit down an' have our usual game of crib, that's all."

Buzz Taylor was trying unsuccessfully to peer into the place over Creepy's shoulder.

"Mrs. Lump is worried, that's all. Stills are dangerous. They can explode."

"She oughta know," Creepy said. "Isn't that what killed her old man? Him cookin' up some kickapoo joy juice, set off the fumes, an' that's all she wrote?"

"He died of heart failure."

"Oh yeah, right. Saw Mrs. Lump without her face on an'

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bought the farm. Dropped dead in his tracks right there."

"Anyway," Buzz said with gravity, "I just thought I'd check. And don't forget about smoking in the rooms, all right?"

"It's all right if you say it is," Creepy replied cheerfully, closing the door.

He came up the hallway, digging his fixings out of his pocket, and began constructing a cigarette while he grinned at them.

"The Buzzard says it's all right to smoke. Change of heart, I guess. An' Mrs. Lump thinks we're gonna blow the dang place up. Ain't that cute?"

They filed out of the Buzzard's boarding house and headed down Burton Street to make a reconnaissance. The object of their attention was the LFFCU—the Lakeside Farmer and Fisherman's Credit Union. Creepy cautioned them that they shouldn't all go into the place at once, that it might attract unwanted attention. This in mind, they entered separately; first Creepy, followed by Billy, and a minute or so later Alexander Brewster bringing up the rear.

The doc didn't even want to be there. He didn't see the need.

"What's the point?" he had argued back in Billy Highway's kitchen. "I have nothing whatsoever to do with that particular stage of the operation."

"You got everything to do with it," Creepy had told him. "We all do. One for all and all for one, right?"

The doc stopped just inside the door with a look of suppressed irritation on his face; he feigned an interest in a rack of leaflets that set forth mortgage rates and the terms of savings accounts.

And there in the corner was the vault, its gleaming door standing open and looking like it weighed a couple of thousand tons. One of the tellers came free and raised an inquiring eyebrow at Creepy Culbertson, who shuffled forward immediately, grinning as if he had a pain somewhere.

"Can I get an income tax form here, sweetheart?"

"No. You get them at the post office."

"Thanks a million, hon."

They trooped out, forgetting to keep any distance between themselves. Slogging back along the icy pavement, Billy whispered, "Jeez, did you see the size of that door? I mean, I seen it before, but I never really noticed it. That sucker must be two foot thick!"

"All for show," Creepy said. "We're gonna go in through the wall."

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"You shouldn't have called that woman sweetheart," the doc lectured Creepy. "You reminded me of Humphrey Bogart in an old black and white gangster movie, just before the bad guys appear with their guns blazing."

"Really?" Creepy smoothed what was left of his hair back and stepped along a little more sprightly. "You think it'll land us in the pictures?"

"It's more likely to land us in the penitentiary."

"You worry too much."

"Someone has to."

"Guys," Billy appealed to them, "guys. Are you listening to me here? After looking at that safe, really *looking* at it, I'm not so sure we can pull this off. It's not too late, you know. We can still back out of it. We can still pull the pin if we want to."

"What?" scoffed Creepy. "An' sit around, the time we got left to us on this planet, takin' crap from the Buzzard, an' wonderin' how things might've turned out if we'd just had some guts? We're this close to scoring—" He plucked an imaginary greenback out of the air. "—an' we gotta go through with it!" He turned on Brewster. "How about you, Doc? You chickening out too? Are you ready to be shoved around by the likes of the Buzzard the rest of your natural life?"

Brewster trudged on a few steps, eyes hooded, face drawn down deep into his woolen scarf as he exercised his not inconsiderable mental powers.

"No," he said finally and somberly, "I don't believe I can do that. I really don't think I can manage it." He let out a thin sigh. "All my life I've been waiting for things to fall back into place for me. I kept telling myself, a man of my ability, it just had to happen. But it never did. And I know why too. I was too much the gentleman. I just wouldn't go against the system. No, I'm determined to see this through. Bite the bullet and take care of business."

"Atta boy, Doc," Creepy said, clapping Brewster on the back so hard the other man staggered, "you hold that thought." He glanced at Billy. "Well?"

"I'm in," Billy Highway managed.

"Good man. We're still in business, then." Creepy halted, holding his collar shut against the wind with a gnarled fist. "Well now, boys, would you check that out."

They had reached the end of the block where the tall fieldstone facade of Our Lady of the Interlake Church took up most of the corner. A knife-edged wind pressed around the walls, cutting through their inadequate clothing and sucking the breath out of

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them. Creepy was gazing at a dry-cleaning van that had just pulled up at the curb. The driver had removed some plastic-sheathed garments from the back of the vehicle and was carrying them around to the side door that led up to the clerestory.

"It's appalling," Father Mulhollen told Robideau fervently. He had large, weepy eyes, which today looked particularly sad. "Theft of church property? I never thought I'd live to see the day."

"Someone slipped into the vestry . . . ?"

"I'm afraid so. Look here. They came up these stairs, then through this door and made off with my soutanes—my cassocks. I usually keep them in a closet in the glebe house, but they had just come back from the cleaners, and the deliveryman hung them in here. My bad luck." A liverish look crossed his face as he reconsidered the point. "Or good luck. If the thief had come into the glebe house after them, I might have been butchered where I stood." He crossed himself.

"You think someone would commit murder just to steal some old clothes?" Robideau said.

"Why not? It seems murder is taken very lightly nowadays. The church fights mightily to instill decent values, but look what we're up against. Video games, television, that insidious World Wide Web. These are secular times. We may be losing the battle. And besides, the vestments weren't that old."

"Anything else missing?" Robideau glanced around the room.

"Nothing. I've checked and double-checked. It's as if the clothing was what the thief came for, and once he had it, he left immediately."

"He?"

"Figuratively speaking."

"An ecclesiastical garment is a strange thing to steal," Robideau observed, thinking as he said it of Pete Melynchuk's beer, Buzz Taylor's ice scraper, and Arney Arvelson's miscellaneous chemicals. He got his notepad out. "Soutane," he said. "How do you spell that?"

Another word for his list

But not the last. Little Freddie Ferguson called a few hours later to complain that a pair of brand-new walkie-talkies had disappeared from his car. "Little FRS jobs, Chief. Motorola, the latest model. Somebody opened the door of my vehicle and swiped them right off the dash, these little holders I got there for them."

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"And what do you use walkie-talkies for, Fred?"

"Hunting."

"I see. Out in the forest."

"No, in the Wal-Mart, hunting for my wife. She's always wandering away. Great little gadgets for that, Chief, you ought to get yourself a pair."

Robïdeau took down a description of the missing items, hung up the phone, and consulted his list.

BEER
SCRAPER
CHEMICALS
SOUTANES

And picking up the pen, he added, WALKIE-TALKIES.

He put the pen down, puffed his cheeks out, and folded his arms.

"Scavenger hunt?" he muttered.

Creepy Culbertson was adamant that they would each wear one of the purloined garments. "It's what I call confuse-a-cop. Ski masks over our faces, an' these things covering up our clothes. The perfect disguise. When we go in there, you gotta know there'll be cameras. That means we need to camouflage ourselves any way we can."

"You said we'd spray paint the cameras," the doc said dryly.

Creepy shrugged. "An' we will too. We'll spray paint any camera lens we spot. But you got to remember there's bound to be one or two we don't spot hidden here an' there." He tugged at his chin. "It might help to do another recce."

"Another what?" Brewster was testy. "I do wish you'd speak English."

"A recce. Another look around. I want to know where the cameras are, at least the ones we can see. That'll be your job, Billy, when the time comes. With the paint can, givin' each of 'em a quick shot."

"If we're not going in until Sunday, it isn't necessary that I attend today," Brewster said stiffly. "I've already been there once."

"Listen, Doc. Remember the deal. All for one—"

"And one for all. I know what you said. But I don't recall agreeing to it." The doc winced as Creepy popped open the last of the Honey Browns with his nicotine-stained teeth. "Must I remind you? This isn't some swashbuckling Hollywood extravaganza. This is real. This is for keeps."

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"Oh, it's for keeps, all right." Creepy spat the cap into his hand, flipped it at the trash basket, raised the bottle to the doc, and drank. After wiping his grizzled chin on his sleeve, he jerked his head at the shoebox sitting on the window ledge. "That creation of yours all ready to go?"

"I don't know. It takes time to cure properly. It will be ready to go by Sunday, I can guarantee you that."

"An' what about our electronics whiz?" He winked at Billy. "Those little radios you scammed gonna do the job?"

"All rigged up," Billy said. "You just make sure they're both switched on, then all you do is press the call button."

"Good. I think we ought to bring the gadget along with us when we go out on our recce today, just to get the feel of it."

Brewster looked appalled.

"What? You can't be serious!"

"A dry run. Don't get excited. Carry it in a shopping bag or somethin', nobody'll give it a second glance."

"A dry run!" Exasperated, Brewster forced out his breath and swung his spectacled face from side to side with disapprobation.

"We got to be sure nothin' goes wrong, Doc. We only get one shot at this."

"You think I don't know that? Why do you imagine I've gone over the arming procedure with you two at least a hundred times?" Brewster stood up, glanced at the black, buttoned clerical robes draped over the back of the chair, let out a moan of suppressed fury, then shuffled to the window. He put his face up close to the heavy frost. His voice rasped when he spoke. "It *will* work. It's *got* to." He turned an indignant glare on his partners in crime. "Do you know the best job that was offered to me after . . . after all that unpleasantness?" He swallowed. "Manager at a fireworks factory. A *fireworks* factory! Can you imagine? Me. Almost a Nobel laureate!"

"Maybe you should've taken it," Billy said. "You know what they say, Doc, the road not traveled . . ."

"Hey. That's some kinda poetry, isn't it?" Creepy Culbertson said. "Can you do the one about the boy on the burning deck?"

The long, sleek cigarette boat rumbled up to the jetty, and the larger man killed her engines. The smaller man jumped out and secured a line. He got a second line on her while the first man disembarked, then hopped back down into the boat to retrieve a large, lumpy sports bag. Both men wore heavy fleece jackets and knitted caps. They checked their watches, then sauntered

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up the hill toward Burton Street. On a more summery day, they might have been tourists.

"Hardy souls," the doc commented. "That lake will be frozen solid in another two weeks."

"I always wanted a go-fast boat like that," Billy said, trailing Creepy and Brewster past the front of the drugstore. Brewster carried the so-called gadget in the shoebox they had dug out of Billy's closet. It was a bright and sunny day, most of the snow had melted, another welcome stretch of Indian summer to enjoy before winter got them in its grasp again. They could see down Coppis Street to the old fisherman's wharf, where the large craft lay like a basking shark under the shadowed timbers of the quay. "Know why they're called cigarette boats? Named after an old rumrunner from the thirties, fastest boat of its day."

"Interesting," Brewster mumbled, clearly not interested in the least.

"Talk to the guy," Creepy said. "Next week you can buy it."

"Only it wasn't the fastest," Billy said. "Know what was? The *Revuocnav*, Johnny Schnarr's boat. That's Vancouver spelt backwards. He called it that to confuse people, running booze down the West Coast."

"It confuses me," Creepy admitted.

"You notice," Billy threw a last glance behind them, "that boat's got no name or number on it at all? Maybe *she's* a rumrunner."

They kept walking. The credit union was a block away.

"So I just duck inside," Billy said, rehearsing his instructions, "find out where the cameras are and then pop back out again?"

"Yeah, but try not to be too obvious about it. Grab a bunch of them leaflets, pretend you're studyin' up."

The two men from the mystery boat reached Burton Street and, after a backward glance for nonexistent traffic, began angling across the road, making for the credit union building that stood a another fifty yards up the block.

"What do you figure they got in that bag?" Billy wondered aloud.

"Money," muttered the doc sullenly. He shifted the shoebox from the crook of his right arm to his left. He added. "And I hope there's lots of it. It'll be ours come next Sunday."

"Hey, now, that ain't right," Creepy said, slowing his pace.

They stopped where they were and followed his gaze.

At the entrance to the credit union, the men from the boat had also paused. While one man peered in through the doors, the other dropped the sports bag on the ground and unzipped it open.

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"I don't like the look of that," Creepy said.

The men rolled the knitted caps down over their faces—ski masks—picked the bag up, and pushed in through the doors.

"Oh no," Billy said. "Oh jeez!"

"Gimme that box," Creepy snapped, and grabbing it out of the doc's hands, took off at a gimpy run with it, heading back the way they had come.

"Those men are robbing our bank," the doc said softly to Billy, as if he couldn't quite absorb the fact. Then, forcing it out between his teeth, *"Those men are robbing our bank!"*

Robideau was just about to get into his car when he heard the sound of gunfire echoing off the storefronts. He rushed to the corner and instinctively looked toward the credit union, out of breath from his twenty-yard sprint. He almost collided with Arney Arvelson, who was wheezing along in the opposite direction.

"Wrong way, chief." Arney threw out his arm, one finger jabbing at the harbor. "Two men, dark clothing. Took off down Coppis Street toward the old fisherman's wharf. Bank robbers!" His eyes were wild.

They hurried together down the sloping street toward the old wharf.

"What happened?"

"It was terrifying. Four or five of us are waiting in line, these guys bust in and start shooting up the place."

"Was anyone hurt?"

"No. I don't think so. They just made us all lie down."

They weren't going to arrive at the wharf in time to do anything about it, that was plain. With a hundred yards still to go, they heard a pair of powerful engines roar to life, shattering the calm, and saw a long, sleek, narrow hull nose out of the shadows below the dark timbers.

"Get your gun out," Arney bleated. "Shoot a hole in that thing!"

"I don't have a gun." Robideau couldn't run any farther. He slowed to a walk, pressing his hand to his side, exhausted. A small crowd was already gathering, everyone staring as the boat and the two dark figures aboard her swept past the low wake sign, exhaust pipes bellowing.

"My god," Arney said weakly, stopping at the edge of the wharf, "they're getting away."

"Looks like it." This from a soft voice just behind them. Robideau turned to see who had spoken and spotted Creepy Culbertson standing a few feet away. He was red in the face, bitter, and angry. A tough, sinewy little figure with his hands planted

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deep in his pockets. His fellow roomers shuffled in behind him, Billy Highway and old Alexander Brewster. They looked equally upset and resentful, as if their life savings had been snatched away from them by the thieves in the receding boat.

The fleeing craft was really screaming now, sending twin, tilted rooster tails of frothing lake water eight feet in the air. It set the few craft that hadn't yet been taken out of the water bucking wildly against their ropes. Beyond the reach and beyond the commotion, Lake Winnipeg lay vast and bleak and as indifferent as a salt sea, the distant shore lost to view beyond a muzzy, winter gray horizon.

Creepy muttered something and grimaced. His hand moved in his pocket. There was a sudden, sharp concussion in the harbor, and the back of the boat blew completely off.

A gasp arose from the assembled onlookers, followed immediately by a stunned silence, then a whoop of ecstatic delight. The wrecked craft was already sinking, her bow angling desperately up at the sky. A smoke cloud drifted over the waves. Debris plopped down into the water. The two thieves were black dots floundering in the white caps, and a twenty-foot fishing boat started out for their rescue, a feather of foam streaming from its bow.

"Funny thing," Robideau said half to himself.

Pete Melynchuk had stopped by the office for any news about his missing beer.

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Some of the property that vanished during that crime spree has been returned."

Of the missing—presumed stolen—items, the ice scraper had reappeared in its usual place, leaning next to the doorbell against Buzz Taylor's house; Father Mulhollen's soutanes were found stuffed behind the hymnals at the back of the church; and one of Little Freddie Ferguson's walkie-talkies had turned up in his mailbox. What didn't turn up was the matching walkie-talkie, Arney Arvelson's chemicals, or Pete's beer.

Pete shook his head, coming to grips with the worst.

"I don't think I'm gonna see that beer again, chief."

"No, Pete, probably not."

"Billy Highway told me he was sorry about it. I thought to myself, why should you be sorry? But I guess he heard, talkin' to somebody, how I got ripped off that night."

"I guess so."

"Run into him down there at the wharf. Then he asked me if I ever seen a boat blow up like that before."

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"And have you?"

"Nope."

"Neither have I."

"Did you hear old Creepy? I couldn't believe the guy."

"Couldn't believe what?"

"He was standin' right there beside you."

"Couldn't believe what?"

"I think he said, 'Okay, Mr. Cigarette, that's as far as you're goin', or somethin' like that."

"So?"

Pete looked at the chief, his blue eyes narrow and questioning. "This was before the damn boat blew up. Jeez! They don't call that guy Creepy for nothin'."

Robideau pursed his lips. Tilted back in his chair. Scratched the back of his neck.

"No kidding," he said.

Billy Highway opened the door to Robideau, then stiffened, pressing his hands to his thighs. "Did—did you come to arrest us?"

"I'd need a reason to do that," Robideau said.

"Oh. Oh yeah." Looking relieved, Billy stood back to let Robideau enter the tiny, tired-looking apartment. A small, battle-scarred drop-leaf table had been dragged into the middle of the room, wings extended, and at it sat the other members of the Gang of Three, Alexander Brewster and Creepy Culbertson. Brewster, gray hair bristling at his temples, looked annoyed at the intrusion, but then he always did look annoyed. Creepy Culbertson gazed back with twinkling eyes, smoking as usual, his cigarette in an ashtray at his elbow sending a thin stream of white smoke twisting up into the air.

"Want to sit in, chief?" Creepy said. "Crib day. We were just about to start another game." He winked. "Penny a point."

"I guess I can afford that." Robideau slipped his coat off and took a seat. "You don't mind if I ask you fellows a few questions while we play?"

"Ask away, chief. Only don't ask us how to count your cards. It's against house rules to tell you. You're s'posed to know how to do that." He tipped his head at his two chums. "You know Billy, I guess. An' the doc, retired cabby, almost won the no-bell prize one time. I tell him almost don't count, except in horseshoes an' hand grenades."

"Of course I know Billy and Alex." The crib board was an old one and must have seen hundreds of games, the shellac finish worn completely away between the holes. The original pegs were

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gone, stubs of broken toothpicks snapped off at different lengths serving in their place. "The reason I stopped by," Robideau said, "I was hoping you gentlemen could tell me something about that robbery at the credit union."

"Now how would we know anything about that?" Creepy asked. He shuffled the cards with unnerving facility. "Us old-timers don't get out much, you know."

"You were out that day. And one of the tellers remembers the three of you stopping by the bank two or three times during the last few weeks."

"Well, you've done your homework. We mighta stopped by the bank, chief. People do that, you know."

"Sure. Only they generally stop there to conduct business, not to stand around and admire the place."

"Is that what they said? They must be house proud, chief." Creepy dealt, firing the cards quickly and with pinpoint accuracy across the table. "Seems to me we stopped by one time for a tax form, only they didn't have none."

"I heard that. But this is November. Tax time isn't until the spring."

"File early, chief, guys like us. Takes a while to check our arithmetic, the vast fortunes we got to account for." He raised an eyebrow. "You gonna throw somethin' in the crib?"

Robideau complied. The game proceeded.

"Actually, one reason I'm asking," Robideau said, "I wondered if any of you had seen either of those two fellows hanging around the place earlier. Or anyone that might have appeared out of place or suspicious."

"I did," Creepy said. He glanced at Robideau's eight and threw down a seven. "Fifteen for two." He moved his peg ahead. "I seen Brewster. He always looks out of place an' suspicious. Check out them beady little eyes."

"I do not have beady eyes," the doc retorted. "Twenty-two!" He snapped down another seven. "And two for a pair." He moved his peg.

"Twenny-nine," Billy said, playing yet another seven, "an' six for three." He advanced his toothpick six positions.

My God, I'm going to be pegged to death, Robideau thought. He checked his hand. His smallest card was a four. He sighed. "Go."

"Thirty-one for two," Creepy said, playing a deuce, "an' one for last card." He pegged.

"What you're thinking, Chief," Billy said, fanning his cards out for the count, "is that those guys probably came to End of Main and cased the joint a couple of times."

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The doc muttered, "Language," and sniffed reprovingly.

"I think somebody did."

"Only makes sense," Billy said.

"There's been other unlawful activity in the town lately as well." Robideau laid down his own hand. Everyone pegged except him. "It started with a case of beer going missing just across the street from here. At about that same time an ice scraper belonging to your super disappeared. And on the same night there was a break-in at the hardware store on the corner."

"Virtual crime wave," Billy said, shuffling.

"Virtual stupidity," the doc muttered.

"A few more things vanished as well," Robideau went on. "Some robes from the church, a pair of FRS radios." He glanced around the table. "And here's the interesting thing. It all happened within five hundred yards of this house."

The three men exchanged glances. Then Creepy cleared his throat.

"This neighborhood's goin' to hell in a handbasket," he said. Then he frowned. "Keep shuffling them cards, Chief, an' you're gonna set fire to 'em, for cryin' out loud."

Robideau dealt. His cards were junk. They played the hand out quickly, and he only advanced two points. He was being slaughtered by these guys.

"I heard, though," Billy said haltingly, "that most of the missing stuff was returned."

"I heard that too," Creepy said. He nudged Brewster with his knee. "You hear that, Doc?"

"Of course I did. It's common knowledge."

"Whoever took 'em," Creepy observed, "must've had a change of heart."

"What do you think?" Robideau asked, raising an eyebrow. "More than one crook involved?"

"Hard to say. Maybe not crooks a'tall. Coulda been needy people, for all anyone knows."

They played out the game. The doc won. The others were close. Only Robideau finished behind the skunk line, embarrassingly far back in the stretch.

"Okay, Chief," Creepy said, "more house rules. End of each hand, low sheep takes a hit. Counts his cards, subtracts from twenny-nine, drops the cash on the table." He looked at his scratch pad. "I been keepin' track of it here on the tick sheet. 'Fraid you're the man, chief. Twenny-six fifty."

Robideau looked at him.

"I thought you said it was a penny a point."

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"Well, it is, chief. Times ten."

Robideau sighed and stood up. He reached for his wallet and counted out the money. "I don't suppose any of you know what caused that boat to blow up?"

"How would we know that, chief?" Creepy raked the cash in.

"No reason. I just thought you might have some insight concerning it."

"Not us."

"I see." Shrugging into his coat, Robideau paused when he saw the case of empty beer bottles next to the door. Sleeman's Honey Brown. He glanced again at the three old-timers sitting around the card table, staring guilelessly back at him.

"It's recycling day," he informed them. "The truck will be along soon. You might want to shift these empties out to the curb."

"You kidding us?" Creepy Culbertson said. "We can get two dollars an' forty cents for those, we cart 'em down to the depot ourselves."

"Right."

"We're like you, Chief. On a fixed income here. Just three old harmless retired guys tryin' to scrape by in this world as best we can."

"Is that what you are? I was wondering," Robideau said.

Solution to the April "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Menial
B. Addendum
C. Riders
D. Immediate
E. Lines
F. Yemenite
G. Namath
H. Scheme
I. Terrifies
J. Abolished
K. Sojourned
L. Invites
M. Ochlocrat
N. Kilobyte
O. Irish stew
P. Laugh off
Q. Lhasa apso
R. Ice cream
S. Northeast
T. Generate
U. Thriftiest
V. Ivory Coast
W. Meters
X. Elaborate

QUOTATION

Author—MARILYN STASIO
Work—KILLING TIME (*The New York Times*— June 11, 2006)

"Jeffrey Deaver uses the analogy of a . . . timepiece to describe the . . . crimes that are committed in THE COLD MOON by a serial killer . . . And while his musings on time are . . . lost on . . . his assistant, the reader is free to marvel at his macabre erudition."

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DYING WORDS

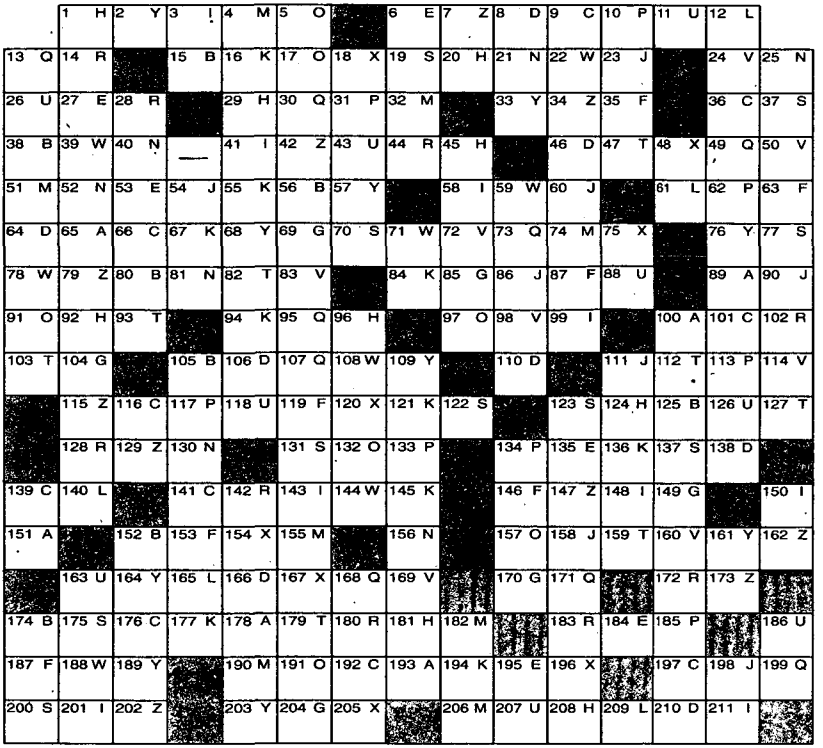
ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER



For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 105. The solution to the puzzle will appear in the June issue.

	DEFINITIONS	WORDS
A.	Computer display	193 65 151 89 178 100
B.	Around the corner	125 15 105 38 56 174 80 152
C.	Security late shift: 2 wds.	141 9 66 101 116 197 176 192 36 139
D.	Homeland Security resource	46 64 166 110 8 106 138 210
E.	Rococo	184 6 27 135 53 195
F.	Tanned hide	146 87 187 119 153 35 63
G.	Wine aftertaste	69 85 204 170 149 104
H.	British weekly (with "The")	96 1 45 29 92 208 181 124 20
I.	Make too much of	150 143 99 211 41 3 58 148 201
J.	Creation	158 111 54 86 90 198 23 60
K.	Like Fred Rogers old TV persona	121 194 94 84 67 177 55 145 136 16
L.	Listings near indications and contraindications	209 12 61 140 165
M.	Czarist description	155 4 74 206 51 190 32 182
N.	Garage forte	25 40 52 156 21 130 81
O.	Regards	91 97 157 132 5 191 17
P.	Unchanging value	113 31 10 133 62 117 185 134

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Q. John Charles Frémont contemporary: 2 wds.
107 199 95 49 73 168 171 30 13

R. Charm
128 172 14 183 102 44 180 28 142

S. 1733 colony
77 122 175 19 200 131 70 37 123 137

T. Art of oratory
179 93 47 127 82 159 112 103

U. Gabriel, in a way
163 26 88 11 43 126 186 207 118

V. Advancing
98 83 160 114 50 72 24 169

W. Start of a Texas battle cry
59 22 39 108 188 78 144 71

X. Best
205 154 196 75 120 167 48 18

Y. Flush locale: 2 wds.
189 203 57 164 109 68 76 2 161 33

Z. Ionesco drama
202 34 79 173 129 42 147 162 7 115

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KANGAROO COURT

TONI L. P. KELNER

The kids in the auditorium were goofing off, but they settled down when the bailiff stepped up to the microphone and said, "The Forty-Third Annual Session of the Jackson's Bridge High School Kangaroo Court is now in session, the Honorable Judges Dunbar, Reid, and Cuthbert presiding. Please rise."

We three judges were waiting in the wings, and as everybody else stood up we hopped in, our kangaroo tails and ears flapping as we went.

I had never hated Jackson's Bridge High School more than I did at that moment.

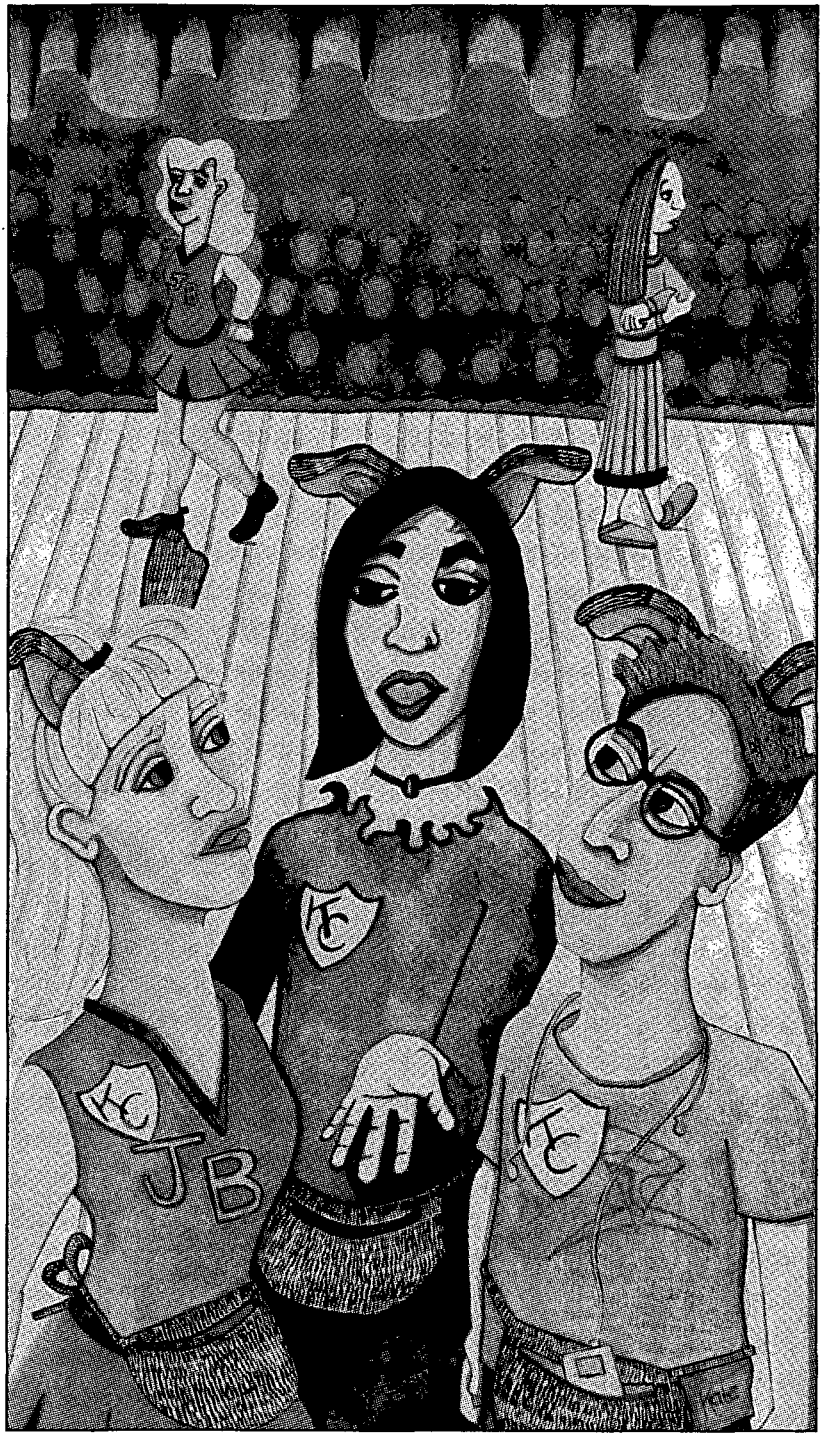
In a way, it was my own fault that I got stuck with the tail.

I'd heard people talking about Rat Day before, but it wasn't until a couple of days before the big event that my homeroom teacher, Mr. Lilly, went through the rules, and I came to realize how lame it really was. Once a year, the seniors were allowed to spend the whole day telling every other student in the school what to do. Not just the way teachers get off on it, either. No, the seniors could tell us underclassmen to wear our clothes inside out or push a peanut down the hall with our noses or sing like the losers on *American Idol*. This was known as being "ratted," while the pranks were known as "rats." Those of us ratted were supposed to laugh merrily and go along with the gag.

"Are you serious?" I said, when Mr. Lilly was finished. "People actually put up with that?" The rest of the kids in my homeroom, mindless sheep for the most part, looked at me as if I were the crazy one. "What genius came up with this bright idea?"

"My grandfather," a voice said from the door, where Principal Picket had materialized. I swear that woman moved like a cat. Not a sleek black cat or a street-smart alley cat, but a sneaky Persian with a smug expression on her flat face. She was always turning up in the middle of some class when I least wanted her around. And I never wanted her around.

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Kate Forman

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"I see Mr. Lilly is explaining one of our most cherished traditions. You see, Garnet, my granddaddy first came up with the idea to help students blow off steam when spring fever hits, and I do believe the students would rise up if I ever even considered canceling it. Not that I would, of course. Doesn't it sound like fun?"

"Yeah, like a root canal with no Novocain." I probably shouldn't have said that, but there was something about that woman's tone and attitude that made me want to get myself in trouble. So I followed it up with, "I thought ritualized hazing was illegal. I'm surprised nobody's ever sued the school."

"Well, maybe people up North go to court over every little thing, but people around hear don't resort to that kind of shenanigans." The way she said "up North" made it sound as if I'd been raised in New York or Boston, not Charlotte, North Carolina. "Some students do get a little carried away, which is why we have a court system in place to take care of any problems that might arise. So don't you worry. I'm sure you'll enjoy it, and in two more years you'll be a senior yourself, and then you'll be in charge."

"Only two years of torture—how nice," I said, already trying to decide if I was going to have a sore throat or menstrual cramps to keep me home on Rat Day.

But Picket was no fool and must have known what I was thinking. "Now you be sure and stay healthy. If you miss Rat Day without a verifiable illness or family emergency, you'll lose your Rat Day privileges as a senior."

As if I cared. But then came something I did care about.

"Not only that," she added, "but you'll be barred from all extracurricular activities for the rest of the semester. Which would include Mr. Lilly's drama club. Bye now!"

As she slimed away, I looked at Mr. Lilly and demanded, "Is that true?"

He nodded sympathetically. "That's the rule."

"Jesus freaking Christ!"

"Language," Mr. Lilly warned me, but he wasn't really mad. He was the only teacher I liked at all, and working on the drama club production of *Macbeth* was the most fun I'd had since my parents had forced me to move to Jackson's Bridge.

That meant that unless I wanted to kiss my shot at playing Lady Macbeth good-bye, I was going to have to endure a day of hell. I had no illusions that it would be fun. Not only was I the "new kid," meaning that I hadn't been in school with the same group of yahoos since kindergarten, but I was also known as

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"that weird goth girl" just because I happened to look fabulous in black. I was going to be a magnet for every sadistic senior in the school.

The bell rang, but as I was grabbing my bag, Mr. Lilly said, "Garnet, can you stay for a moment?"

There was a handful of snickers because people assumed I was in trouble, and a couple of busybodies tried to hang around to see what Lilly was going to do to me, but he sent them on their way.

"Sorry about the language," I said, semisincerely, "but this whole Rat Day thing—"

"I know. Look, there's one rule I didn't get a chance to explain." That's when he told me about the Kangaroo Court, which would be held the day after Rat Day to judge people who hadn't done their assigned rat or whose rats had gone too far. "I'm in charge of picking judges, and I thought you might want to be the sophomore class judge." He pulled out an honest-to-God badge from his desk drawer and held it out to me.

"And why would I want to do this?"

"Because in order to preserve their objectivity, judges are immune from being ratted."

"Seriously?"

He nodded.

Of course, I took it. I'd have taken it even if he'd warned me about the ears and the tail, but it's probably just as well he didn't mention the pouch.

I didn't really know the other two judges, though it was a small enough school that I'd seen them around. The junior was fairly cool, in a geeky sort of way, and was working tech on *Macbeth*. I think he actually liked his kangaroo regalia; he was wearing a Qantas Airline T-shirt and had stuck his iPod in his pouch. His name was Faulkner, of all things. His mother claimed distant kinship to the famed Southern writer, and Faulkner confessed that he was just relieved that she hadn't named him after a Confederate general like she had his brother.

The freshman was Mary Beth, who I'd tried to hate when I first got to Jackson's Bridge. She was perky, smart, and popular, and if that weren't enough to burn my buns, she was on the junior varsity cheerleading squad. Unfortunately, she was too damned nice to hate. Honestly and sincerely nice. I was hoping to find out she was a closet ax murderer or something equally disgusting, but in the meantime, I'd just have to be nice right back at her.

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Then there was me, feeling like a complete asshole, and when a camera flashed, I realized that my judicial debut was being immortalized in the student newspaper or the yearbook. Maybe both. My pouch was overflowing with happiness.

At a signal from Stuart the bailiff, who was also the junior class president, we judges sat, and the students in the auditorium did too. The court secretary, also the junior class secretary, handed us copies of the docket and then returned to her table, ready to record our verdicts on a brand-new yellow legal pad she'd probably bought just to look official.

I looked at the table in front of me and rolled my eyes. I had an official legal pad, too, and two sharpened number-two pencils. I could die happy.

Stuart said, "The first case is Trask versus Mitchell. Annette Trask and Erin Mitchell, approach the bench."

As the two ersatz litigants made their way to the podiums set up in front of the stage, I tried to look as if I knew what I was doing. The way Mr. Lilly had explained the procedure, it shouldn't be too bad. There were only two kinds of cases. Either an underclassman had refused a rat, undermining some sainted senior's privileges, or a senior had issued a rat that was unsafe or inappropriate. Of course, very few rats were considered unsafe or inappropriate. As long as clothes stayed on, physical contact minimal, and no bones were broken, most were considered good, clean fun. I wondered how many psychologists had paid for their Porsches with the fees from the formerly ratted.

The bailiff swore Annette and Erin in, using a wildly nonpolitically correct Bible, and then they were ready to start arguing the case. I figured I better pretend I cared. There was no telling when Principal Picket might come sneaking around.

That first case was pretty straightforward. Annette, a senior and noted jock, had gone into the girls' locker room while a class was getting dressed after fourth period gym and made them all sing "We Are Family" into her cell phone. Since the reception was bad in the locker room itself, they'd had to sing in the showers, but Erin stayed at her locker instead. I'd never noticed Erin before, maybe because she looked like a photocopy of half a dozen other juniors, only with less impressive curves. Erin claimed that she'd wanted to participate in the sing-along but that she'd had to take care of a "female matter."

Once both girls had told their stories, we judges turned off our microphones and huddled together to deliberate.

"Erin's guilty," Faulkner said without hesitation.

"I don't know," Mary Beth said, sounding as nice as ever.

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"Maybe it really is her time of the month."

"No way," I said. "If she was on the rag, she'd have gone to the toilet stall to—" I saw that Faulkner was looking queasy, and decided to keep it clean. "If she needed to use a sanitary product, she'd have done so privately, not while standing at her locker."

Despite my effort to be delicate, Faulkner turned red, but he nodded and said, "Um, yeah. That's right."

Mary Beth looked unhappy, but agreed.

"What should we make her do?" Faulkner asked gleefully.

"You're not enjoying this a bit, are you?" I asked.

Faulkner shrugged. "I tried to get Rat Day banned last year, and Erin was one of the ones who made a stink about it. I figure it's only fair."

"You mean I wouldn't be wearing these ears if it weren't for her?"

"Well," Faulkner admitted, "she wasn't the only one. Caroline Hendry was the big one, but you know how Erin is always trying to suck up to her and the others in the so-called popular crowd."

I knew no such thing, actually, but I was all for going after *anybody* who'd worked to keep Rat Day on the calendar. "Let's throw the book at her!"

We went back and forth for a few minutes before deciding to make Erin sing "I Feel Pretty" over the loudspeaker during the morning announcements the following day.

The rest of the cases were pretty much the same. Somebody didn't do the rat they were supposed to do because it was embarrassing, and we made them do something even more embarrassing as payback. I might have felt guilty if I'd liked any of the people involved, but at least two of them had played the laugh-at-the-goth-chick game, and another one had written a racist screed for the school paper that had really frosted my shorts. In fact, it was almost alarming how much I got into the whole thing. My future therapist was going to have to spend months assuaging the guilt I was going to feel someday. In the meantime, I kept coming up with humiliating punishments, with the able assistance of Faulkner. That boy had a real mean streak—I was really starting to like him.

The only time we found in favor of the underclassman was when it turned out that the senior involved was the underclassman's ex-boyfriend. His story was that she wouldn't put on the old football uniform he'd told her to wear, but her witnesses pointed out that he'd had two other guys waiting nearby. One had a super-soaker water gun, and the other had a cell phone to

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get shots of the impromptu wet T-shirt contest, no doubt intending to post them on MySpace. That was the first time I saw Mary Beth get angry, and I was right there with her. We sentenced the jerk and his confederates to wearing cheerleader outfits and cleaning out the boys' bathroom for a week. The cheerleader outfits were my idea, and I was rather proud of the enhancement.

Still, even dumping on people I dislike gets boring after a while, and the other kids in the auditorium were looking bored, too, until the bailiff called out the last case: Hendry versus Burns. All of a sudden, people sat up straight and got quiet.

Caroline Hendry was the head varsity cheerleader and, unlike Mary Beth, was exactly what a cheerleader was supposed to be: busty, blond, vain, and mean. Roxanne Burns, on the other hand, had a figure that was as straight as her long brown hair. She wore glasses instead of contacts to prove her mighty intellect and edited the school literary magazine with an iron fist and a red pen that never seemed to run out of ink.

The two of them were like a snake and a mongoose—natural-born enemies. Having been unlucky enough to have encountered both of them my first week at Jackson's Bridge High, I hated each with equal enthusiasm.

Caroline had introduced herself promptly so she could start insulting my hair, clothes, and school supplies right away. At first she'd denounced me as goth, then decided I was emo, and finally settled for calling me a freak—she couldn't even keep her cultural stereotypes straight! As for Roxanne, when I attended a meeting for potential staff members and contributors to the literary magazine, she'd made it painfully clear that my help was not wanted. Apparently, genre fiction of any kind was not appropriately uplifting, which left me out in the cold.

I realized then that I was about to have a chance to cash in the karma points I'd earned for dressing like a marsupial in public, with interest.

Caroline, as the aggrieved party, went first, speaking with an accent that was eerily reminiscent of Principal Picket's. "I feel bad about having to bring all this up," she lied, "but it just wouldn't be fair to the other students who played by the rules if I didn't."

Roxanne snorted, and for once I was in complete agreement with her, even though I had to keep my stern-but-fair judge face on.

Caroline tried to look shocked but couldn't quite keep the flash of irritation out of her eyes. "Rat Day has always been real

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important to me, and I thought it might be fun to be more creative this year. To actually have rats. So I bought a dozen pairs of ears and tails." She reached into a Belk's shopping bag and pulled out a set. The gray ears were pretty convincing, but I personally thought the tail looked more like an opossum than a rat. "I had an eyebrow pencil to draw on whiskers too."

The cheerleader looked so pleased by her own thoroughness that I wanted to slug her.

"Roxanne was one of the first people I gave one to. She put them on like she was supposed to, but when I saw her later in the day, she wasn't wearing them anymore."

"I had on the ears!" Roxanne said.

"But not the tail!" Caroline snapped, then went back into her sweeter-than-Tupelo-honey voice. "It just wasn't the same without the tail. Everybody else I told to wear them wore them all day long, and Roxanne should have too." She sniffed in Roxanne's direction. "That's all I've got to say."

Faulkner said, "Roxanne, do you have a rebuttal?"

"I certainly do. Caroline was lying in wait for me when I arrived at school yesterday, and—"

"Objection!" Caroline said. "I was not lying anywhere. I just happened to see her."

"One, we don't have objections in Kangaroo Court," Faulkner said. "And two, Caroline, you had your chance. Now it's Roxanne's turn."

Caroline's eyes narrowed, but she didn't say anything else as Roxanne continued.

"As I said, Caroline was waiting for me when I arrived and demanded that I put on the ears and tail. Which I did. And I let her draw whiskers on my face, even though I'm allergic to that brand of makeup." Now it was her turn to look pleased with herself because she'd been such a martyr.

"Why didn't you keep the tail on all day?" Mary Beth asked. "Did you lose it?"

"Not exactly," Roxanne replied. "You see, I took it off at the beginning of gym class—"

"See!" Caroline crowed.

"School regulations clearly state that no accessories of any kind are to be worn with gym uniforms. Even if I'd been willing to break the rules, Coach Odo told me I *had* to leave the ears and tail in my gym locker. I was fully intending to put them back on after class, but when I got back to my locker, the tail was gone. Somebody had stolen it." She looked directly at Caroline, making it obvious who she thought the thief was. "I

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looked everywhere, but I couldn't find it. I did put the ears on and was wearing them when I left the locker room, which is when Caroline saw me. I tried to explain, but she said she was bringing me up on charges. Quite a coincidence that she was lying in wait for me *again*."

"Are you saying I took the tail?" Caroline said indignantly. "You just threw it away because you didn't want to wear it."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'd worn it half the day already. Why throw it away then?"

"How do I know you didn't throw it away right after I gave it to you?"

Faulkner and Mary Beth banged their gavels on the table simultaneously. Personally, I'd been enjoying the carnage, even holding out a slight hope that it would get physical.

Mary Beth said, "Roxanne, can you prove you were wearing the tail before gym class?"

"Absolutely. I have witnesses," she said, and three juniors in the audience stood up and nodded.

"What about you, Caroline?" Faulkner said. "Can you prove you didn't swipe the tail?"

"I have Spanish fourth period," she said, "and I was there the entire time."

No witnesses were needed to confirm that. Señora Casali was infamous for not letting anybody leave class even *uno momento* before the bell rang.

"Then if neither of you has anything to add," Faulkner said, "we'll make our decision."

We huddled once more.

"This one's tricky," Mary Beth said.

"What's tricky about it?" Faulkner asked. "Roxanne didn't wear the tail, so she has to pay the penalty."

"But it's not her fault if the tail was missing."

"You don't really think Caroline managed to sneak out of Casali's class, do you?"

"Maybe it got lost."

"Come on. She just didn't want to wear it. Guilty."

But this time Mary Beth looked stubborn. "I don't think Roxanne would lie. If she says the tail was gone, then it was gone."

"Okay, one vote for guilty, one vote for not guilty. That makes you the tiebreaker, Garnet."

"So it does." Caroline or Roxanne? Damned if I wasn't torn. I didn't know which of them to believe any more than I knew which of them I disliked the most. For a second I considered

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flipping a coin. What difference would it make really?

If I ruled for Caroline, Roxanne would have to do something embarrassing or forgo her Rat Day privileges the next year. Not exactly hard time at San Quentin. The only thing was, that would make Caroline happy, which I really didn't want to do.

So maybe I should rule in favor of Roxanne. Only that would be like putting out an ad that Caroline had stolen the rat tail and set Roxanne up, which wouldn't do much for her reputation. And in a school like Jackson's Bridge, reputation counted for a lot. Yeah, I hated her with a fiery passion and all that, but even if I had been willing to ruin her school career, I wasn't willing to do it unless I was absolutely sure she was at fault.

Faulkner and Mary Beth were still looking at me expectantly. In fact, everybody in the whole freaking auditorium was looking at me expectantly. I was stuck, and getting pissed about it. If only Caroline hadn't caught Roxanne without that damned tail!

That's when I figured something out. So I turned the microphone back on and said, "I have a few more questions." Caroline and Roxanne both looked irked at the delay, while Faulkner and Mary Beth looked confused, but I didn't let that stop me. "Roxanne, you said that Caroline was outside the locker room when you came out."

"That's right."

"And Caroline, you said you had Spanish while Roxanne was in gym."

"Yes, Your Honor."

"So what were you doing near the gym?"

For the first time, Caroline looked uncomfortable. "It was my lunch period."

"So? The gym isn't on the way from Señora Casali's classroom to the cafeteria."

She fidgeted a bit, then finally said, "I heard Roxanne wasn't wearing the tail, so I went to check."

"How did you hear this?"

"I got a text message."

No wonder she hadn't wanted to admit it. Cell phones were supposed to be turned off during school hours, and if she'd been caught receiving a message, hers would have been confiscated for the rest of the semester.

But enforcing that wasn't my problem. I said, "Who sent the message?"

"Erin Mitchell."

Better and better. Erin was the defendant from our first case.

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"Erin was in gym class with Roxanne?"

"I guess."

"Do you have your cell phone now?"

"Only on silent mode!"

"Let me see it."

She looked reluctant, but surrendered her top-of-the-line Razr, which I handed to Faulkner. "Can you check the call history to see when she received the message from Erin?"

It took a while because Caroline was apparently a text messaging addict, but he finally located the record and announced, "She got the message at 11:58."

"Roxanne, what time does gym class end?"

"Officially at twelve, but Coach Odo sends us to the locker room at 11:45 to get dressed."

"So you left the locker room at the noon bell?"

"More like a quarter after. Between having to sing that abominable song Annette ratted us with and looking for the tail, I ran late."

"And Caroline was waiting for you?"

"Right."

"Was Erin with her?"

"I didn't notice, but she probably was." She rolled her eyes. "Erin's always following along behind Caroline."

I said, "Bailiff, call Erin to the stand."

After a moment, the scrawny junior came down to the stage and arranged herself so that she was standing near Caroline.

"Just to remind you, you're still under oath," I said.

"Okay, fine," she said, not meeting my eyes.

"So Erin, when did you leave the locker room after gym class yesterday?"

"I'm not sure."

"Was it before or after you sent the text message to Caroline?"

"Um . . . I'm not sure."

"It must have been before 11:58," Mary Beth put in helpfully, "or you wouldn't have been able to send the text message. Everybody knows you don't get decent reception in the locker room."

I'd known that, thanks to the first case, but was happy to have Mary Beth point it out. "Is that right?" I asked Erin.

"I guess."

"So at 11:58 you sent the message that Roxanne wasn't wearing her tail, even though Roxanne was searching for it at that very moment."

The girl blanched. "She was already dressed before I left the locker room."

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"Dressed, maybe, but still looking for the tail. How did you know she wasn't going to find it?"

Now all of those faces that had been watching me were watching Erin.

"I heard her tell somebody she wasn't going to wear it," she stammered.

"Who did she say that to?" I asked. "We can bring up the entire gym class to confirm."

"Um . . . Maybe I only thought I heard it."

"Or maybe you knew where the tail was. We already have sworn testimony that you didn't sing with the others in the shower room. Isn't it true that you disobeyed Annette so you could stay in the locker room, take the tail from Roxanne's locker, hide it, and then call Caroline to get Roxanne in trouble?"

She jerked her head around like a trapped rat, appropriately enough. "Well, Caroline said to—"

"You skank!" Caroline hissed. "Don't you dare try to pin this on me!"

"No, no! It's just that I knew that— I mean, everybody knows you hate Roxanne, and I was trying to help you."

"Help me? You call this helping! You douche bag!"

"Language," I said, but it was hard not to grin.

Faulkner gestured, and we three judges leaned away from the microphones to confer. It didn't take long.

Then I announced, "The case of Hendry versus Burns is hereby dismissed. Roxanne, would you like to press charges against Erin?"

"You bet I will!"

"No, I want to!" Caroline said. "She's the one who got me into this."

"You can be co-complainants. The case of Hendry and Burns versus Mitchell is now added to the docket." I turned to Erin. "Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

"I didn't mean— I just wanted—" Then she hung her head. "No."

"Then we will render our verdict. Erin, you have been found guilty of interfering in Rat Day proceedings. You are to retrieve the tail from wherever it was you hid it and then to wear it to class every day for the next thirty days. If you are seen without it, or if you in any way try to avoid your sentence, you will lose all Rat Day privileges in the future." The three of us banged our gavels in unison, and Faulkner declared the session of Kangaroo Court complete. As the bailiff told the gallery to rise, the three of us hopped out the way we'd hopped in.

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"I still think we should have gone ahead and taken away Erin's privileges for next year," Faulkner groused.

"No, this is enough," Mary Beth said with an uncharacteristic gleam in her eye. "Can you imagine how Caroline is going to treat her for the rest of the year? That's what she gets for trying to suck up!"

"You go, girl! Let that bad self out!" I said proudly.

Then she had to go and ruin it by saying, "Poor Erin's going to be really lonely from now on. Maybe I should go talk to her."

"Mary Beth, you don't have a bad self, do you?" I said.

She just smiled and went along her decidedly non-bad way.

"She's too good to be real," I said wonderingly.

Faulkner nodded. "We'll have to keep an eye on her just to make sure she doesn't get taken advantage of."

I lifted an eyebrow at the "we" part, but didn't question it. I kind of liked the way it sounded.

"By the way, that was an impressive piece of deduction," he added.

"Thanks. Of course, it means that I've helped maintain Rat Day, which I despise, and missed my best opportunity to strike a blow at either of the school überbitches."

"True. But you made sure that both überbitches owe you, big-time."

I considered it. "So you think Caroline will let me be a cheerleader?"

"Please tell me you're kidding."

I grinned. "Then do you think Roxanne will let me submit to the literary magazine?"

"Forget that pretentious rag. I'm putting together an online zine that's way cooler."

"Yeah? Do you take genre fiction?"

"Is there any other kind?"

"I'll e-mail you a story tonight."

"Boffo." As we picked up our backpacks, he said, "You're going to drama, right? Want to grab a Coke first?"

"Sure."

We started out of the auditorium together, and I even forgot I was still wearing the kangaroo crap. Maybe Jackson's Bridge wasn't a complete hellhole after all.

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THE BONDHOLDER

R. T. LAWTON

"We have a problem."

At the sound of the proprietor's voice, Theodore squeegeed the abrupt perspiration off his pale balding dome with one hand, then glanced quickly around the room. Since the only other ones present in the Inner Sanctum were Cletis Johnston, proprietor of the Twin Brothers Bail Bond firm, and Moklal Feringheea, currently serving as the firm's executive secretary even though foreign intelligence records alleged him to be descended from a long line of hereditary Thuggee families, Theodore Oscar Alan Dewey, as the firm's solitary bail agent, was pretty sure who was going to be on the pointed end of the stick when it came time to rectify whatever this current situation demanded.

"One of our special clients," continued the proprietor, "a certain Mr. Jovanovich, has gone missing. Perhaps you remember him? About six foot, extremely slender build, straight brown hair parted on the left, wears dark-colored European suits, size seven black shoes—rather small for one of his height—and he walks with a slight limp."

Theodore immediately reflected on some of their special clients who had fallen from high places, gone deep-water swimming without the appropriate underwater breathing apparatus, or had been otherwise rendered deceased by their suddenly outraged partners in crime. And of course, how could he forget those special clients who had been fatally struck by speeding taxicabs? However, as Theodore often rationalized, these latter ones *had* been jaywalking outside of well-marked crosswalks at the time, so what could they expect? In any case, each client capped off his long or short criminal career by taking up temporary residence at an establishment owned by one of the local morticians. Naturally, the bail bond firm made an extraordinary profit upon the demise of said client. Business was good and the profit margin remained exceedingly high, but then, the firm only accepted "special clients."

At this point, Theodore couldn't help but pick up on the growing agitation in the proprietor's voice.

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"As you well know, if we as the bondholder cannot produce the client, either alive or dead, at the appropriate time for court, then our bond is forfeit."

Theodore raised his left hand, the one with the permanently straight pinky finger where the bone had been broken and improperly reset. A finger that Theodore preferred not to talk about, mainly because it referred back to a previous labor-management dispute involving the proprietor and one of Theodore's earlier employee reviews.

"Excuse me, sir, but don't we have one of our usual under-the-table agreements in force with our missing client?"

Careful not to crease the sleeves of his newest Shantung silk suit in soft tones of beige to complement his ebony skin, Cletis Johnston tented his fingers on the desktop and gazed at his minion. The proprietor's almost Oriental eyes seemed to have an extra hardness to their gaze on this particular day.

"Yes, Theodore, that particular contract is currently in force, and the firm will greatly benefit from the stolen stamp collection that Mr. Jovanovich gratefully put up as extra collateral in order to meet our terms. The collection contains several very rare stamps, however . . ."

These "however" points in the proprietor's presentation were where Theodore's pulse tended to develop an increased rhythm, which insisted on thumping alarmingly along in an irregular pattern.

". . . due to the recent past elections, our economy hasn't yet made up its mind whether we are in a recession or a period of boom. Thus it grieves me to have *any* losses that affect our bottom line. Net profit is everything in our business."

Theodore bobbed his head in apparent agreement. It was the wise thing to do: After all, he still had nine fingers that worked as they should. Albeit, when he contemplated the proprietor's last statement, he found himself in a bit of a quandary. In the past, the proprietor had made various statements indicating that secrecy and stealth in their operations were *everything*. Also, that loyalty to the firm was *everything*. And once, the proprietor had even said that finding the right special client was *everything*. Now Theodore wasn't sure which of these many statements he was supposed to focus on. Everything was so confusing.

"We have no choice," muttered the proprietor, "our client must be brought to light."

Suddenly realizing his left hand was still raised in the air, Theodore figured he now had two options at this point. He could surreptitiously lower his hand and hope no one had noticed his

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lapse of memory as to what his extremities were doing, or he could ask another question since his hand was up anyway. If it hadn't been for that cadaverous Thuggee, Moklal Feringheea, who saw and remembered everything, standing right next to him, Theodore would've gone for the lowered hand option. However, it soon became a moot point as Theodore found that his brain had already sent a signal for his mouth to say something.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but where should we start looking?"

Cletis Johnston shifted his gaze back to his solitary bail-bond agent.

"It would seem the obvious place for you to start is the location where our missing client had last been seen."

Theodore mulled that information over for a while, then opened his mouth again.

"Yes, sir, but where exactly was he last seen?"

The proprietor barely glanced at a document lying in the precise center of his rich mahogany desktop.

"Mr. Jovanovich was observed stepping onto the deck of a dinner cruise ship docked at Pier 38 in the harbor, but no one has sighted him onboard since the ship cast off from the dock."

"Maybe . . .," began Theodore.

But the proprietor raised his hand, palm out, in a stop-right-there motion.

"Wait until I give you all the facts, Theodore. And, whereas I normally prefer that you not have a written record on your person during the beginning of one of our—shall we say—incidents, in this particular instance, you may wish to take notes here in order to refresh your memory at a later time."

Theodore scrambled to find his small flip-top spiral notebook usually stashed in the inside breast pocket of his plaid sport coat. And, oh yeah, a pen to write with. The notebook was right where it should have been. He opened it up, found a blank page, and prepared to write.

No pen.

Cletis Johnston was now up from his executive leather chair and pacing back and forth behind his desk, reciting facts of the case without further use of notes.

"Rumors concerning our rival, Herr Morden, have recently surfaced. It appears he has returned to Bay City and wishes to interfere in our business affairs once again. Thus I suspect he may have something to do with the disappearance of our client."

Theodore tucked the last words, ". . . disappearance of our client," into the back of his memory as he searched for a pen. None visible on the proprietor's clean desktop. He turned toward

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the cadaverous Hindu beside him, but no, he couldn't very well ask him for one. Quickly, Theodore searched the side pockets of his own sport coat. Inside the left pocket, he found a small hole in one corner of the lining. However, by using his index finger to probe deeper into the hole and directly below said pocket, he felt the outline of a stubby wooden pencil trapped in the lining, the kind of short pencil used in keeping score during one's golf game, no eraser. The best Theodore could recall, the pencil came from a round of miniature golf when he was conducting surveillance on a potential client. In any case, it would serve his purpose now. All he need do was push the pencil back up through the small hole in his pocket lining and start writing.

Meanwhile, the proprietor continued with his recitation.

"In anticipation of any problems that Herr Morden might cause our firm upon his return, I therefore hired a detective agency to shadow our Mr. Jovanovich these last few days and thus keep watch over him. The agency's operatives followed Jovanovich to Pier 38 and watched him go onboard the dinner cruise ship, appropriately named the *Bay Watch*. Mr. Jovanovich, unaccompanied by anyone else, proceeded into a large room on the main deck where meals are served during the cruise . . . and then he disappeared from sight."

Now scribbling furiously to catch up, Theodore asked his next question without taking time to raise his hand.

"Did the private detectives follow him onboard?"

"Unfortunately, no. They were stopped by security at the gangplank. It seems the mayor and various other high officials had reserved this particular cruise as a private fund-raiser for their political party."

Theodore paused briefly to wonder how it was that criminals were able to travel in the same high social circles as people who ran the government. Present company in the Inner Sanctum excluded, of course.

"You're saying our client has an in with the mayor?"

"Mr. Jovanovich has been a large contributor to party coffers in the past, but we're not sure how he managed an invitation to this event. His recent arrest and resulting publicity should have made him a political liability if he were to be recognized by any of the news reporters standing dockside when the ship departed. Perhaps that explains why he boarded several hours before any other guests."

"And no one's laid eyes on Jovanovich since?"

"Quite correct, Theodore, at least as far as members of our side are concerned. It seems sunlight reflecting off the cabin's plate-

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glass windows rendered vision into the ship's interior impossible; therefore the detective agency's men rented a speedboat and followed the dinner cruise ship on its tour around the bay, hoping for a better look. Operatives scanned the deck and large cabin with binoculars and telescopes as best they could. No sight of our missing man."

Theodore ducked his head to hide his sudden flush of exuberance now that someone other than himself had recently failed the proprietor. At least the hired detectives' failure should draw some of the proprietor's attention away from those prior incidents, which Theodore preferred to call his occasional professional mistakes. As it was, these incidents were seldom his own fault since he could readily rationalize why these mishaps had the misfortune to occur to him during the performance of his many duties. On the bright side, however, this negative development on the part of others in the current situation just might provide him, Theodore, with a chance to show his true worth to the firm.

"What would you like me to do, sir?"

The proprietor tented his long slender fingers and leaned back in his executive leather chair.

"Theodore, I want you at the dock to meet the dinner cruise ship when she returns. You have about twenty minutes to get there. Closely observe each departing passenger. If Mr. Jovanovich does not come ashore, then you will board and search all hiding places on the vessel."

Cletis Johnston passed an envelope across the top of his desk.

"This letter from our friend, the precinct captain, will get you all the cooperation you need from the ship's officers and crew. Report back to me as soon as possible."

Letter in one hand and notebook and stubby pencil in the other, Theodore immediately rushed for the door. He had a mission.

Three hours and twenty-nine minutes later, Theodore dragged himself through the front entrance of the Twin Brothers Bail Bond firm and approached the door to the proprietor's office. He had hoped that the executive secretary's desk right outside the entrance to the Inner Sanctum would be vacant. No such luck.

The cadaverous Hindu sitting guard at the door motioned him forward.

Theodore took three reluctant steps toward the side of the desk. He stopped just out of arm's reach—Moklal Feringheea's long-armed reach, not the shorter length of his own stubby arms.

Moklal made a pointing motion with his left index finger toward his own sunken left cheek.

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"You have a spot of grease close by your nose."

Theodore rubbed at his right cheek next to his nose.

"No, no, the grease is on the other side of your face. Stand still and I will get it for you."

Moklal opened the top drawer of his desk and brought out a yellow silk scarf knotted at both ends.

Upon quickly recognizing the *rumal,* a scarf used in the ritual strangulation of a Thuggee victim, Theodore immediately took two steps backward. He had no intention of placing his head into a hangman's noose over a mere smudge of alleged grease.

Moklal smiled in amusement.

"As the Mahatma so wisely says, 'There would be no one to frighten you if you refused to be afraid.' "

"I'm not scared," retorted Theodore.

"Then you have nothing to worry about."

Theodore tried to wrap his mind around that thought, finally gave up, and advanced into the proprietor's office.

From behind his mahogany desk, Cletis Johnston motioned at his own left cheek.

"You have a smudge of grease."

This time, Theodore frantically rubbed both cheeks.

"You got it," murmured the proprietor. "Now what did you find out at the cruise ship?"

Theodore fumbled for his notebook, opened it, and began to recite from his notes.

"I watched all the departing passengers. Mr. Jovanovich never got off. After everyone had left, including all of the crew, I went on board and showed your letter to the ship's captain."

"Any problems?"

"No. The captain let me search the ship from stem to stern and top to bottom."

"And?"

"Nothing."

"You searched the upper deck?"

"Yes, sir. Not much up there except the captain's cabin and that little room where he steers the boat. No place to hide anything as large as a body anywhere in that room, plus I examined everything in the captain's cabin, his closet, and even under his bunk. The top deck's completely clear."

"What about the engine room and lockers down below?"

"I'd never been in the basement of a boat before," replied Theodore. "Parts of it were pretty dark down there, but the captain loaned me a flashlight, so I could see better. He even helped me move all the stuff inside the lockers. I checked them all, no

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sign of our missing client. Then I rummaged through the engine room. That's probably where I got the grease on my face. No bodies down there either."

Using the tips of his well-manicured fingers, Cletis Johnston absently stroked one end of his long, silken, black Zapata mustache. He remained silent for a moment.

"Then according to your report, the only places left for you to search were the large dining cabin and the ship's galley on the main deck."

Theodore nodded. "Yes, sir." He wasn't sure what a ship's galley was, but in any case he decided to continue his report by mentioning his search of the kitchen area.

"Since the mayor had previously requested a specific cuisine for the fund-raising event, the local political party insisted to the ship's captain that the dinner be catered by a certain upscale Bay City restaurant, and therefore the ship's kitchen was clean and didn't take long to look through. I opened the oven doors and pulled out all the cabinet drawers. They couldn't have hidden anything larger than a can of pork and beans in that room."

Now the proprietor slowly tapped one index finger on his executive mahogany desktop.

"Then we're down to the large dining room. Describe it."

Theodore flipped a page over in his spiral notebook before reciting the details.

"Well, sir, you enter the dining room from the back of the boat. Along this back wall are two small bars manned by one bartender on each side of the door. Forward of the two bars are several round tables covered with white tablecloths. Each table has about six chairs around it. Up along the front wall are an eight-foot table with several large chafing pans of hot food on it, plus an eight-foot-long stainless steel table filled with crushed ice for those foods needed to be kept cold. I opened the cabinet doors beneath both tables, but there were just linen napkins, clean silverware, and extra unused plates inside. And, let's see, there were six large insulated chests, which merely contained bags of crushed ice, placed in one corner of the cabin close to the stainless steel table. Naturally, I went through all the ice chests just in case they parted him out. I didn't want to overlook anything."

"That's it, the whole room?"

Theodore fidgeted.

"Of course then I looked in the heating and air-conditioning ducts, under the round tables, behind the curtains framing the large plate-glass windows all around the room, and also underneath both bars. I even went outside and sorted through the

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lockers where they keep the life preservers. I couldn't find a body anywhere on that boat."

"Where were the crewmen during your search?"

"When I got back outside, those private detectives you hired had the crewmen all lined up in single file on the dock. They had also rounded up all the catering staff and looked them over, made 'em leave all their hot and cold food, chafing pans, extra bags of ice, and other equipment right where it was on the boat."

Theodore noticed the proprietor was now looking past Theodore's right ear. At that moment, a soft cough came from directly behind Theodore's shoulder. He shuddered. That damn Thuggee had slipped up on his blind side. Before Theodore could speak, the cadaverous Hindu had stepped around him with a message slip in his hand.

"Please excuse me, sir," said Moklal, as he extended the slip of paper to the proprietor, "but a phone call has come in."

Cletis glanced at the message.

"Who sent this information?" he demanded.

"The caller refused to leave a name, merely the message."

Cletis reached to one corner of his desktop, pulled his laptop computer closer, and raised the screen.

"This note suggests that I should read my latest e-mail."

With a couple of clicks, the proprietor ignored the window text asking if he knew who sent this e-mail, and opened it anyway. Next he clicked on the hyperlink embedded in the e-mail. After a short pause of gazing at the screen, he then turned the laptop around so Theodore and Moklal could see the digital photo being displayed.

"That's a picture of our missing client," exclaimed Theodore. "And it was taken inside the dining cabin of that dinner cruise ship I searched."

"From the look of things," replied the proprietor, "I would assume our Mr. Jovanovich is either drugged into a state of unconsciousness or else he is very dead. And after taking a closer look at the man's bloodshot eyes and the purple finger marks around his throat, I strongly suspect the latter."

As Theodore watched, the digital photo began to dissolve in a swirl of pixels.

"What the heck is this?" blurted Theodore.

Three words briefly appeared in place of the photo. *Die glückliche Jagd*. Then the screen went blank.

"What'd them foreign words mean?"

Cletis Johnston slowly closed his laptop.

"I believe Herr Morden merely wished us a happy hunting. It

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seems that he and his group have terminated our client and sent us a photo of his trophy kill. It would appear this is to be a test of our abilities. Consider it as an exercise in urban survival."

Theodore's mouth opened and closed a few times before he uttered, "But the picture melted on the screen."

"Herr Morden usually erases his path behind him. Now we must accept his challenge and find the body wherever he has hidden it."

"Where else can we look?"

"Ever since passengers started jumping, falling from, or being pushed off of cruise ships in the Caribbean," said the proprietor, "the cruise lines have installed hidden cameras onboard to record and show the true circumstances of these happenings. It's a matter of liability and lawsuits. See if our dinner cruise ship also installed any security cameras on their little boat. And hurry, Theodore, in this case, time may very well be measured in money."

Once again, Theodore had a mission to perform, and the clock was running close behind him.

Upon his return to the bail bond firm, Theodore quietly let himself in through the front door and relocked it from the inside. Leaving the interior lights off, he catfooted his way through the dark waiting room and down the dim hallway. At the end of the corridor, he stopped and surreptitiously peeked around the corner. The executive secretary's desk sat in a pool of light cast from an overhead source, but the cadaverous Hindu's chair was vacant. Theodore breathed a sigh of relief.

"Were you looking for me?" inquired a deep voice near the stubby bail agent's left ear.

Theodore jumped three feet forward, then spun around to peer back into the dimly lit hall.

"Where were you? I didn't see you anywhere."

"As the Mahatma says, 'Where there is light, there is shadow.' It seems you were looking for me in the light, whereas I merely waited in the shadow for your return. Darkness is not a problem for one who is comfortable there. Tell me, did you bring the information our proprietor has requested?"

"Hey, the boss told me to get it, so I'll be the one to give it to him."

"Then you should not delay."

Turning his body halfway toward the Inner Sanctum while still keeping Moklal Feringheea in view, Theodore crab-walked a few steps before feeling safe enough to turn fully toward the door where he was headed. Now, if he could only come up with a parting retort, he could regain some of his self-esteem. Pausing with

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one hand on the door handle, Theodore glanced back over his shoulder to say, "The proprietor and I were doing just fine before you came to work here." And that's when his nose almost bumped into Moklal's chest.

"Ah," replied the executive secretary, as he looked down on the bald top of Theodore's head. "Under these circumstances, perhaps I could interest you in the Master's teaching that 'Jealousy presupposes the possibility of rivalry.' "

"I'm not . . . what you said."

"Of course not, but if you were, then you need to ask yourself, 'What is equality of rights between a giant and a dwarf?' "

Once again, Theodore opened his mouth to reply, but wasn't sure where all this foreign philosophy was going. He couldn't quite put his finger on whether he'd been insulted, but he hoped the Hindu wasn't making allusions to his, Theodore's, short stature. That would be the last straw.

At that point, he was saved by the proprietor's voice projecting from the Inner Sanctum.

"Come in, Theodore. We already have a large-screen TV set up to view the security tapes. You did bring the tapes with you, did you not?"

"Uh, yes, sir."

Theodore dug two flat plastic boxes out of his cheap leather briefcase. He placed the boxes on the proprietor's mahogany desk and stepped back.

"Did anyone have a chance to tamper with the tapes?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Johnston. After I left the first time, those detectives you hired kept everyone, including the captain, off the boat."

"Very well, let's see what we have here. Start with the port-side tape."

Moklal stepped forward, opened both plastic boxes, carefully examined the labels, selected one tape, and inserted it into the player. The current day's date appeared at the lower left of the TV screen, while a digital time clock started running in the lower right corner. Taking up the rest of the screen was a forward-looking view of the left side of the boat.

At approximately the time that the private investigators had said Mr. Jovanovich boarded the dinner cruise ship, there was their missing client, neatly dressed in a pinstriped suit, stepping onto the deck and strolling toward the main cabin. Then he disappeared from the camera's view. For several minutes thereafter no one else was seen to board the ship.

"Speed up the video," commanded the proprietor.

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Moklal pressed a button on the remote and the action jerked forward. When a man in a white coat suddenly appeared on screen, Moklal hit the PLAY button and all movement returned to normal speed.

"He's one of the caterers," exclaimed Theodore.

Three more men in white coats stepped onto the boat, each one pushing a metal dolly of food containers. They made a couple of trips back and forth before everything they needed seemed to be loaded onto the cruise ship.

"That third man there." Theodore pointed at the screen. "He keeps hiding his face from the camera."

"Quite right," replied the proprietor, "but then I suspect Herr Morden has no wish to have his picture taken for posterity. Tell me Theodore, do our private investigators still have all the caterers quarantined on the dock?"

"No, sir, during my last visit I was standing there on the dock asking the captain for his surveillance tapes when all the caterers suddenly up and charged the private investigators en masse, bowled them over, and then disappeared into the city streets."

"Can't say I'm surprised. But I do hope our detectives made sure none of the caterers or crew was wearing a disguise."

Theodore rolled his eyes upward as if the answer was written somewhere on the underside of his eyelids.

"Well, sir, Mr. Johnston, as I recall, one of the detectives did go around pulling on hair and mustaches to make sure none of them were fake. A couple of fights almost broke out at that point."

"I don't suppose photos were taken of any of the caterers?"

"No, sir, not to my knowledge."

The proprietor reached out with his left hand, long slender fingers splayed, as if he were trying to grasp something nearby.

"We were so close, Theodore, you probably could have reached out and touched him. Now he's gone and we may never get this close to him again."

"Are you talking about our client, Mr. Jovanovich?"

"No, Theodore, I'm speaking of Herr Morden. We unknowingly had him within our grasp, and he eluded us. In the past, he always operated at a safe distance. Now he's becoming bolder and more aggressive."

"Oh."

"We must be more careful in the future, Theodore. From now on, watchfulness is everything."

Theodore thought about it for a moment. His List of Everything was getting to be a long list. Now where the hell did that miniature

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golf pencil go? Fortunately, his mind could sometimes multitask, especially if it were a subject already sticking in his mind.

"But what about our missing client, you know, Mr. Jovanovich? What do we do about him?"

"Quite right, Theodore, the fox has already escaped. We mustn't also lose the prize in this contest of wills between us."

"So what do we do now?"

The proprietor tented his fingers before him, leaned back in his executive leather chair, and stared off into the dark recesses in the far corner of the ceiling.

For several minutes absolute silence reigned in the Inner Sanctum. Theodore hesitated to clear his throat or even breathe. For that matter, he was sure that he could now hear the pulse of his heartbeat inside his right ear. He just hoped it wasn't too loud.

"There's one crucial detail you've failed to inform me of, Theodore."

"What detail is that, sir?"

"The menu."

"The menu on the dinner cruise, sir?"

"Exactly."

Theodore thumbed through his notebook again. He also tried to conjure up the containers of food remaining on the serving tables in the main cabin of the cruise ship.

"To the best of my recollection, sir, the chafing dishes on the hot food table contained an excellent marinated jumbo shrimp. I must admit I ate two of them before moving on to the breaded chicken strips. Those were very good when dipped in the Chinese mustard sauce. And then there were the small cubes of superb ham quiche. And of course I can't forget the breaded mushrooms and the . . ."

The proprietor held up his right hand, palm out.

"Enough, Theodore, now tell me about the cold dishes on the stainless steel table."

"Well, sir, that table was packed high with crushed ice and covered with several plates and bowls of food that needed to be kept at a cooler temperature. I ate several of the cold shrimp dipped in cocktail sauce. There were fruit salads and potato salads and marinated vegetables and . . . There were so many dishes there that one bowl or plate almost touched the next one, but the food was great. I tasted almost every dish they had. I'd recommend their chef for our next Christmas party . . . if we have one."

Theodore noticed that the proprietor had lowered his gaze from the distant ceiling and was now looking at him.

"Tell me, Theodore, when you went back to the cruise ship

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hours later for this last trip, did you happen to dine on the cold hors d'oeuvres again?"

Theodore felt himself blushing.

"I haven't had time to eat anything since breakfast, sir, and all that food was just sitting there. Naturally, I didn't want it to go to waste, so I managed to munch on some of it every time I went on board."

"And the last time you were there, Theodore, had the ice melted somewhat on the cold table?"

"Yes, sir, the ice was getting pretty watery and most of the dishes and bowls were starting to lean at odd angles away from the center of the table as if the crushed ice had melted faster on the outside edges. It also looked like something dark had gotten mixed in under the ice, but I figured the food was still cold enough to be safe for human consumption, so I ate a few more snacks to tide me over."

"Interesting, Theodore, but perhaps now you will be perceptive enough to make one more trip to the cruise ship and retrieve our missing client."

"But where?"

"I trust you have a strong stomach, Theodore. It seems that Herr Morden has been keeping our missing client on ice all this time. Our Mister Jovanovich may be a little stiff, but I seriously doubt if he's frozen solid."

For the third time in less than twenty-four hours, Theodore had a mission. This time, the clock was no longer pushing him to hurry; the object of his mission would keep quite well for a while longer. Well, at least until the ice melted.

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

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REEL CRIME

J. RENTILLY

When you've got a dead body on your hands, you stash it in the trunk of a car and run the whole thing off a cliff. That's how these things go—at least in crime fiction, filmed or printed. And that's exactly what critically acclaimed, bestselling author James *(L.A. Confidential, White Jazz)* Ellroy does when he sells his books to Hollywood. He calls them dead and gives them a dispassionate shove into the abyss. Then he cashes the movie studio paycheck.

"It's money for nothing. You have to assume going in that the studio will never make your book into a movie. And if they do, it will probably be [screwed] up beyond recognition," Ellroy says. "So you just shove these books off the cliff. Or you don't."





(top) Don Winslow
(bottom) Jeff Lindsay

Last year, more than seventy-five films based on books were released, while a handful of television series—including *Bones, Dexter,* and *The Women's Murder Club*—were based on bestselling fiction franchises by Kathy Reichs, Jeff Lindsay, and James Patterson, respectively. (The first quarter of 2008 will see the release of filmed adaptations of Scott Smith's *The Ruins,* Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears A Who,* along with *One Missed Call, The Spiderwick Chronicles, Jumper,* and *Rambo,* based on characters created by novelist David Morrell).

According to Writers Guild of America, nearly ten thousand books, magazine articles, and other prose works are optioned by filmmakers annually. Industry pundits believe that bestselling prose is particularly appealing to risk-averse, balance-sheet-oriented Hollywood producers because of its built-in audience, its road-tested story lines, and, frequently, its critical pedigree.

For authors, a Hollywood sale can mean a significant studio paycheck, a healthy sales bump, and wider exposure. Don Winslow,

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author of *The Power of the Dog, The Death and Life of Bobby Z,* and *A Cool Breeze on the Underground,* says his career as a novelist was "pretty much flatlined" a few years ago. During a long, daily commute doing consulting work for Southern California law firms, Winslow tapped out a vivid novel about a retired hitman—"just to amuse myself, really," he says. For *The Winter of Frankie Machine,* he filed the manuscript with his agent on a Tuesday, and by that Friday night, a multi-studio bidding war had broken out; everyone wanted *Frankie,* and suddenly Winslow's career was resuscitated.

"One of these studios offered me more money than I'd ever seen in my life but gave me only twenty minutes to accept it. I said I didn't do business under those conditions, and spent the next twenty minutes cursing myself," Winslow says. "The next call offered five times that amount and I accepted. My life changed, literally, overnight."

In addition to the seven-figure cash infusion, *Frankie* brought Winslow a creative collaboration with actor Robert DeNiro and filmmaker Michael *(Heat, The Insider)* Mann. Production is scheduled to begin in early summer, with Winslow—who says "novelists are generally considered the vestigial bone on the body of cinema"—content to leave the Byzantine adaptation process to Hollywood heavyweights.

Jeff Lindsay served "twelve years of hard time in Hollywood" before penning the bestselling *Dexter* series of novels. "Those years made me aware of how hard it is to adapt something in a way that the author can watch it without wanting to slash his wrists," Lindsay says. When Showtime

A Few Favorite Book-to-Movie Adaptations:

Stephen Gallager: *The Silence of the Lambs* is my idea of the model adaptation. It's the heart and guts of the book—images, relationships, pace, atmosphere, everything the author was looking to put into prose—properly and cinematically reimagined.

Don Winslow: *The Godfather,* definitely. Just an epic story, beautifully told, beautifully shot, with great performances.

Joseph Kanon: *Double Indemnity* is one of the rare occasions when the film is actually better than the book. Billy Wilder took a piece of pulp and made it glorious pulp, with every detail shrewd and knowing, right down to Barbara Stanwyck's anklet, and the sort of dialogue they just don't write anymore.

Jeff Lindsay: *Rosemary's Baby* by Ira Levin. I didn't think the movie would be as scary, sexy, and intense as the book, but it was.



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approached Lindsay about turning *Dexter* into a weekly television series, the author was game but had very low expectations. Then a funny thing happened at the first meeting between author, network, and talent. "They had all read the book. They could quote it. Unreal!" Lindsay says. "They've done a terrific job from day one."

But Winslow's and Lindsay's romances with Tinseltown are the exception, far from the rule. Author Stephen *(The Kingdom of Bones)* Gallagher has spent three decades as a published novelist, and has also adapted a number of other authors' works for film and television, which is to say he has a fair level of pragmatism about Hollywood's lack of fidelity to source material and respect for authors.

"I'm not great at letting go," Gallagher confesses. "I mean, if they tell me they're bringing in Tom Stoppard to punch up my jokes, I'll shut up because I know at the end of the day it's going to make me look good. But I always seem to get my material handed over to some know-nothing friend of the producer."

Gallagher recounts an experience wherein he'd been hired to adapt one of his own novels, then labored to secure financing, cast the film, select locations, and get the film into production. At the last minute, the film's director announced he wanted a "fresh eye" on the screenplay and gave it to his office assistant for a head-to-tail rewrite. "The girl was a nonwriter with no track record or experience. Her draft was worse than awful," Gallagher says, adding that—fortunately—the film was never produced.

Gallagher also recalls the time a screenwriter hired to adapt one of his novels called to ask for tips on scanning the text of Gallagher's novel into screenwriter software. "He wanted to save himself all that typing," says Gallagher. "I couldn't even find a place to begin."

Harlan Coben, author of the bestselling Myron Bolitar mysteries, currently being adapted for Fox Television, also had "miserable experiences" in Hollywood. Then in an unlikely plot twist, he was approached by French filmmakers who wanted to relocate his Philly-set thriller *Tell No One* to Paris. Coben says the film's writer/director Guillaume Canet showed him "great respect." The author's notes on the screenplay were encouraged, and he was even granted a brief cameo in the film, which won four Cesar Awards last year—the French equivalent of Academy Awards.

Coben says he was mesmerized watching his novel's decidedly red-blooded American characters come to life as Frenchmen in *Ne Les Dis A Personne,* as it is titled in France. "There were no

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subtitles and I don't speak a word of French, so it was rather surreal," Coben recalls. "Here I was, watching my story unfold, and I couldn't understand a word."

Most authors—not to mention filmmakers—are sharply divided about what makes a good book-to-film adaptation. One such author, Richard Price, believes the key is "ruthlessness with the source material." The author of *Blood Brothers, The Wanderers,* and *Freedomland,* all turned into films, has adapted the books of others, including the Oscar-nominated *The Color of Money.*

"The only thing a movie owes to a novel is to be true to its spirit. If you're in awe of your source material, the end result is an overly respectful brick up there on the screen, not enough life and too solemn by half," he says.

Conversely, Gallagher believes filmmakers too often play too fast and loose with source material, "plundering their source for ideas, rather than finding the essence of the source." Ellroy believes successful big screen adaptations "determine the scope of the story going in, then reduce the story, make it coherent, and retain the essence of the story. Simple," he laughs acerbically.

Elmore Leonard, whose novels and stories have been widely adapted *(Get Shorty, Out of Sight, Jackie Brown),* was once hired to write a film version of his novel *Glitz.* Though Leonard had always wanted to be a screenwriter, he says the experience chastened him—for good. "I remember going into a meeting with the head of the studio and he stood up in our meeting and said, 'All you did was adapt the book,'" Leonard says. "And I hung my head and said, 'Ah, yeah, sorry.' I realized you're supposed to add something else to make it a screenplay. But damned if I know what it is. I gave up writing movies that day."

Which is to say, there is no end in sight to the volatile alchemy of adapting books for film and television. Perhaps Ellroy's cavalier attitude is right; you push your book off a cliff and then cash the check. Maybe the movie happens. Maybe it doesn't. Maybe it's good. Maybe it's not.

Author Joseph Kanon—who says he was "exceptionally lucky" when his novel *The Good German* was made into a film by Steven Soderbergh, George Clooney, and Cate Blanchett—says the only way for an author to survive his (mis)adventures in Hollywood is to remember one elemental thing. "It's important to keep in mind that the movie is not yours. It's the director's—along with the hundreds of people working for him," says Kanon. "Your book will always be on the shelf and the movie in your head always there. But the one on screen belongs to someone else. The rest is just funny business."



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RED HERRING HOUSE

JAMES POWELL

Two middle-aged Canadians, Wallace and Dean, were eating lunch at a small Greek restaurant near the yacht marina in the shadow of the Pickering, Ontario, nuclear power plant.

During a silent moment, Wallace asked, "So how'd you solve the Pollock business?"

Dean lowered his wineglass. "Has it been that long since we saw each other? Yes, I guess it has." He shrugged. "Sad to say, I had to eliminate Pollock."

The two men had been at the university together. Now Wallace was a partner in a Pickering law firm and Dean a writer of modestly successful mystery novels. (The literary critic for Canada's *Squill and Squire: the Magazine of Bulb Gardening and Country Life*, had described Dean's *The Bloody Belfry Murders*, as "ding-dong entertainment.")

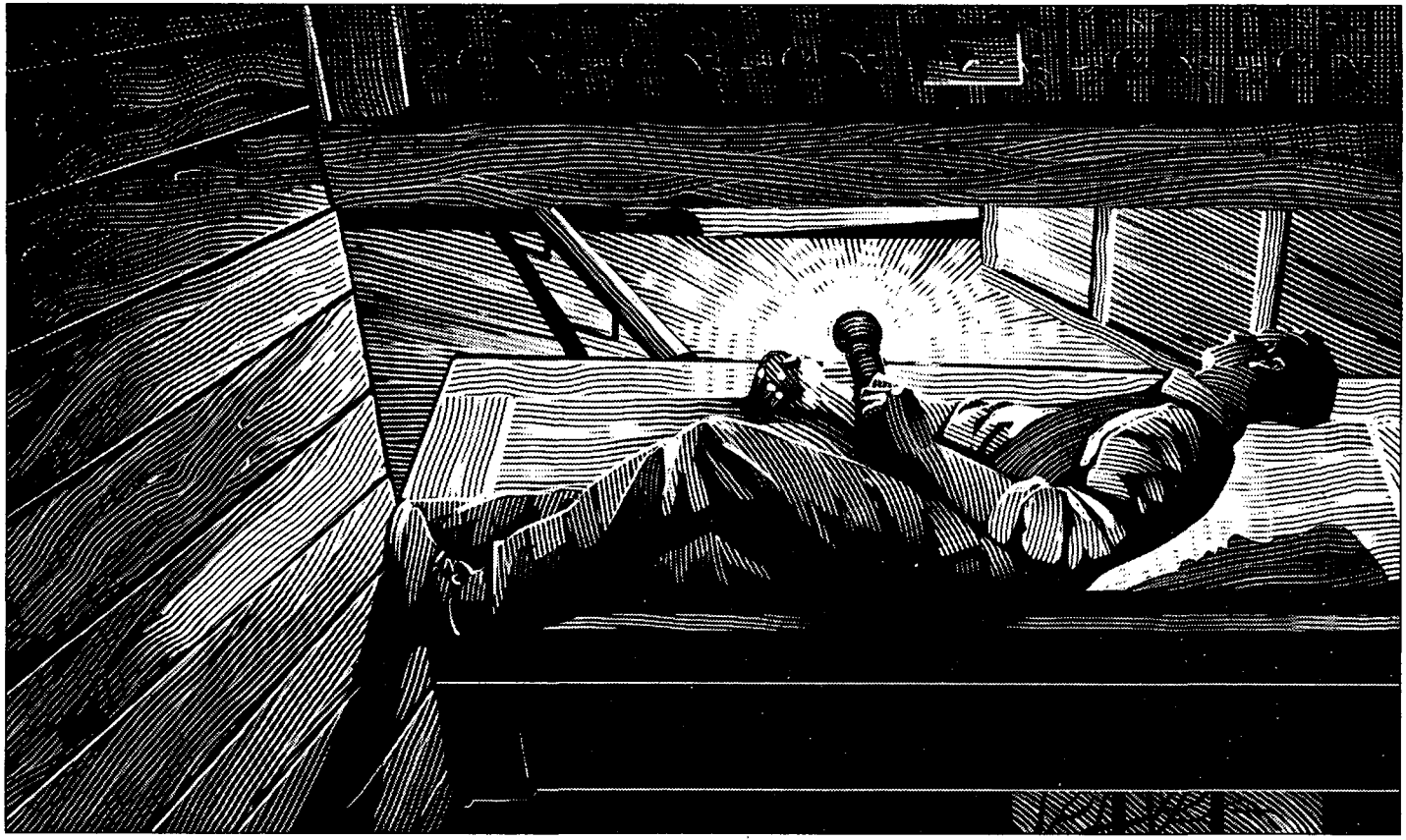
They were friends of the sort who might not see each other for a year or two, but when they did it was as if one or the other had returned from the men's room to continue a conversation just left off. In fact, they usually met in bars or restaurants. Wallace's wife didn't care much for Dean.

At their last get-together Dean had complained about Pollock, a character in his current novel, who'd gone muleheaded on him. He described the scene where it had happened. On a late, overcast September afternoon Pollock sits reading *The Financial Post* in the second floor library of his big country house. Outside in the bushes in raincoat and fedora is Dean's Inspector Trudge. The policeman suspects Pollock is the notorious Greater Toronto Area garrotter because his latest victim was a young clergyman active in good works among the poor to whom Pollock's wealthy Aunt Flora intended to leave her fortune. Now her money would go to Pollock.

Dean explained how he needed Pollock to get up and go to the

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Tim Foley



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telephone on the table next to the window so Trudge can see him and jot down the time. That same afternoon the G. T. A. garrotter will strike again some twenty miles away. The victim's delicate wristwatch set with diamonds, broken in her struggle with the murderer, will prove to Trudge that Pollock couldn't be the murderer. But Dean's problem was Pollock wouldn't get out of his chair.

"He went Mr. Inertia on me," he told Wallace. "Characters need an interior life. You want them to be able to walk around a bit when you get up from the computer. But overdo it, make a character too thoughtful, and suddenly he's wondering why you put him in the novel. He knows he isn't the murderer or the detective. He wonders if he's going to be a victim further down the road. Then he decided he's a red herring, just there to clutter up the plot and confuse the issue. That's when he gets muleheaded."

"Well, look at it from Pollock's point of view." Wallace smiled. "Once Trudge crosses Pollock off his list, he and your readers will lose all interest in him."

"Look at it from my point of view," said Dean. "I'm trying to advance a story here."

"Okay, how about this," said Wallace. "The phone rings. Pollock picks it up. It's a telemarketer. Trudge sees him. End of story."

"I said it was late afternoon," Dean pointed out. "Telemarketers only call at mealtime."

"So a friend, then," said Wallace.

"Pollock doesn't have any friends."

"Then what's-his-name, Pollock's business partner, the one he owes so much money to? Harrington?"

Dean's eyes narrowed. After a moment, he said, "Let's just say Harrington's away on business."

"Then what about Pollock's rich Aunt Flora?"

Dean's expression did not change. "Let's just say Aunt Flora can't come to the phone."

"A wrong number, then," said Wallace. "We all get wrong numbers."

Dean shook his head. "I can hear my readers groan, 'Wrong number? That's the best Dean can come up with?' And from there it isn't far to 'Hell, I can do better than that.' Bingo, another writer wannabe's crowding my space."

Now, months later, sitting in the Greek restaurant, Wallace asked, "So how did you eliminate Pollock?" He cocked an eyebrow and ran a thumbnail across his throat.

Dean shook his head. "Never had the heart to destroy my creations. Mostly this is what I do."

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Dean returned to Pollock's house in the country, reminding Wallace he'd said it was overcast. Now a steady rain starts to fall. Trudge decides to call it a day. He'd parked his car at a nearby roadhouse and stopped in for a drink when he did. The place had a real fire in the fireplace and a barmaid with a wonderful laugh. Now Trudge decides maybe another drink and a bite to eat were in order. He steps out of the bushes, squares his hat, and sets off.

Just then, Pollock, who's the type who likes to look outside when it's raining and he's high and dry inside, gets up and goes to the window. He sees a man in a raincoat and fedora walking away down the road. Isn't it what's-his-name the detective, he wonders? That's odd, he tells himself.

Dean looked over at Wallace. "By 'odd,' Pollock means poorly written," he said. "Now he's really asking for it. I could've saved myself a rewrite by having Trudge turn back for one last look and see Pollock there at the window. But after a crack like that I said the hell with Pollock. He's history. Let the process of elimination begin."

Back at the second floor window, Pollock sees the darkening clouds in the west and wonders if it's going to storm. Then he returns to his reading. An hour later the rain is thudding against the glass. Then just after nightfall the thunder and lightning come crashing and booming overhead. Suddenly, the lights go out. Pollock folds up his newspaper and sits there. Local thunderstorms often double back. When he's sure the storm has moved on he'll go down to the switchbox. Otherwise, he might have to go twice.

But then he hears something, a tap-tap-tapping coming from the basement. He listens. It comes again. Tap-tap-tap. Curious, Pollock gets up, feels his way to the fireplace mantel where he keeps a flashlight and a box of matches, and heads downstairs.

"I know, I know," Dean told Wallace, "if you were in the dark on a stormy night and you heard a noise from the basement you'd stay put. Me too. But characters in books, they're a different breed."

Dean went back to his story. When Pollock reaches the cellar door, the tap-tap-tapping is louder. He pulls the door open and steps inside, his flashlight sweeping across the cement floor. Suddenly, there it is right at his feet, a mechanical rabbit with a battery stuck in its back, beating on a drum. It swivels sharply, scoots right past him and outside just as the door swings shut. Pollock hears the key turn in the lock.

"Hold it," said Wallace. "The Energizer Bunny can turn keys in locks?"

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"If he can beat a drum, why not?" said Dean.

"Well, it's a stretch."

"Not if he stands on his drum," insisted Dean.

Wallace shrugged and Dean returned to Pollock. As the man rattles the doorknob, the batteries in his flashlight—they were not the bunny's brand—dim and die. Pollock strikes a match. When it flares up someone blows out the flame. "Oooh!" goes Pollock. "Oooh!" echo two dozen voices.

"Kind of crowded down there," said Wallace.

"Character was never my strong suit," admitted Dean.

Wallace laughed. "My wife's words exactly."

"I sometimes get careless with characters," Dean explained, "particularly with red herrings who're only there to cloud the issue. But in mystery novels when you come right down to it—except for the murderer, the detective, and a victim or two—mostly what you've got are red herrings."

"Well, I like the part about the Energizer Bunny trapping Mr. Inertia in the cellar," said Wallace, adding, "How long do you keep them down there?"

"My will provides that when I die the lady aluminum siding telemarketer who calls Pollock at mealtime will become concerned because he isn't answering the phone. She'll call the police, and my Inspector Trudge will take the call. 'Hey, I always wanted aluminum siding,' he'll say. 'Get serious, sir,' she'll reply. 'Maybe Mr. Pollock has fallen and can't get up.'

"So Trudge, happy to get any work at all since nice Mr. Dean died, goes to investigate. He knocks on the door and gets no answer. The neighbors tell him they haven't seen any sign of life there since before the last big thunderstorm when everybody's lights went out. So Trudge goes back, forces the front door, and searches the house. When he sees the key in the lock of the door to the cellar, he gives it a turn. The door flies open with such force it slams him against the wall, knocking him unconscious. A small crowd of people pounds past his body and up the stairs.

"That's how it'll work for Pollock and his bunch. And the others too. That tap-tap-tapping from the basement gets book characters every time."

"Hold it," said Wallace. "You mean you've got more cellars full of red herrings?"

"One for every novel and one for more false starts than I care to count," said Dean. "Imaginary real estate comes cheap."

One summer, a year or two after this conversation, Wallace took his visiting daughter and his grandchildren on an outing to a park

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in the country. (Mrs. Wallace didn't care much for picnics.) After the meal, while his daughter and the girls cleared off the picnic table and put things back in the car, Wallace and the boys were passing the old pigskin around. All of a sudden a compact crowd of twenty or so people came marching out of the woods, squinting against the sunshine and carrying with them the faint odor of mouse. Looking straight ahead, they reached the roadway, turned, and vanished from sight.

On the drive home, Wallace passed those same people heading toward Pickering with a determined stride. Somehow, he felt he knew them from somewhere.

Wallace had a lot of time to think about these people in the following weeks while stuck in traffic, which seemed to have gotten worse, or driving around and around trying to find a place to park or waiting for a table in crowded restaurants.

One day while he stood in line at the supermarket checkout—Mrs. Wallace didn't care much for grocery shopping—it occurred to Wallace that he'd never seen the lines so long at the registers. Looking the people over he told himself that if they'd been characters out of one of Dean's novels, none would be murderer, victim, or detective. They'd just be there like red herrings to clutter the plot and confuse the issue.

Somehow this thought reminded him of the people he'd seen marching out of the woods that picnic day. Suddenly he knew his friend Dean had died. He was sad for a moment. Then he felt a chill, and looking around again, he wondered how much imaginary real estate Dean had owned, how many cellars.



Loved the story? Share your thoughts in The Readers' Forum at www.TheMysteryPlace.com.

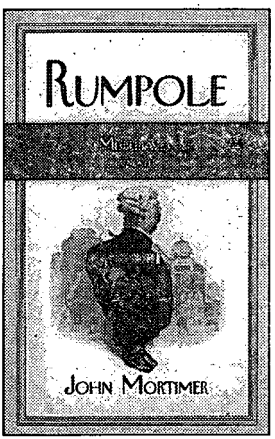
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Booked & Printed

Robert C. Hahn

Mixing humor and murder successfully can be a killing combination. As mystery fans know there are few plots that haven't already been concocted, but there are infinite ways in which an author can make the recipe their own. This issue's authors take vastly different approaches to seasoning their mysteries with humor.

British author John Mortimer's Rumpole Misbehaves (Viking, $23.95) offers sly, acerbic humor largely directed at the minions of the legal system. Rumpole, "the Old Bailey hack," is one of the iconic figures of the modern mystery, having entered the lists more than twenty times to joust with his legal opponents. Hopelessly out of step with more ambitious colleagues, and generally out of favor with them as well as with the judges who preside over his cases, he nonetheless emerges victorious time after time. And the pompous, the priggish, and the sanctimonious are pricked and deflated by Rumpole's deadly combination of wit, bluster, and knowledge of the law.



Rumpole may be the only barrister who finds himself simultaneously defending a boy accused of violating an ASBO (Anti-Social Behavior Order), defending a man accused of murdering a Russian prostitute, and defending himself against an ASBO brought by his own colleagues.

The boy is a child of the Timson clan, whose members Rumpole has successfully defended before. Twelve-year-old Peter's offense is to have kicked a football into a neighboring yard. Despite Rumpole's pleas, an ASBO was issued against Peter. A subsequent violation of the the order leaves Peter facing the possibility of jail time for his offense.

Meanwhile, Rumpole faces an ASBO of his own for flouting chamber rules against smoking, drinking, and eating in chambers—activities that annoy his cohorts enough that they foolishly seek an ASBO as a solution.

But there is more at stake than a boy's freedom, more than a

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man's life, more than Rumpole's own freedom to eat and smoke in chambers—Rumpole is on the cusp of becoming a QC (Queen's Counsel), or, as he prefers to call it; a Queer Customer.

Hilda, Rumpole's wife, also known as She Who Must Be Obeyed, adds her perspective to the narrative as she puts herself out to further his chances for becoming QC but also entertains the delightful idea of reading for the Bar herself.

Mortimer keeps all his elements spinning merrily until they fall into place with a perfectly executed flourish.

Sarah Graves not only mixes murder and mirth, but also cashes in on the whole do-it-yourself remodeling craze in her *Home Repair is Homicide* series. The mysteries are set in Eastport, Maine, where Jacobia "Jake" Tiptree relocated in the series debut *The Dead Cat Bounce* (1998). In THE BOOK OF OLD HOUSES (Bantam, $22), the eleventh in the series, domestic humor is built around the endless frustrations (and unmatched pleasures) of restoring an early nineteenth century fixer-upper.

Jake is a former New York investment banker whose job involved laundering money for "the absolute cream of New York mobster society." She also had a husband, Victor, a brain surgeon who earned the nickname of the "Sperminator" for his extracurricular (and extramarital) affairs.

Leaving that life (and that husband) and starting over in Eastport, she bought an 1823 fixer-upper and began the arduous task of restoration and repair—tasks made all the more difficult by her complete lack of knowledge about home repair.

Graves has surrounded Jake with an evolving cast of characters who offer myriad opportunities for both humor and plot developments. Her teenage son Sam is on his second attempt at overcoming addiction, and her father is an explosives expert and ex-federal fugitive, for instance. But also there are the homely Bella, who's become almost a part of the household, best friend Ellie, and new husband Wade.

This time the house itself provides the catalyst for the mystery when an unusual book is discovered in the cellar. Not only does the book appear to be very, very old, but also to have been written in human blood. Odder still, the book listed all the owners of the house up to and including Jake.

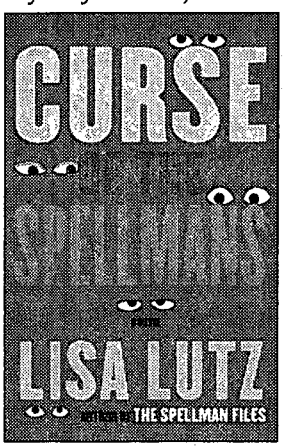
The murder of Horace Robotham, a rare book expert who was examining the book, and the disappearance of the book itself bring Dave DiMaio to Eastport and to Jake. DiMaio, bent on avenging the death of his friend, shows up first at Jake's house, and Jake and Ellie are quickly involved in trying to deflect DiMaio and locate the book, and perhaps the killer, themselves.

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At the same time, Jake has been talked into hosting a party for local doyenne Merrie Fargeorge, who has never quite accepted her. When Jake is overcome by an impulse to demolish and remove an old cast-iron bathtub from an upstairs bathroom less than two days before the party, the stage is set for a disaster.

More disasters loom ahead as murder, theft, party, domestic disputes, and home renovations make a heady mix. Graves and her heroine may have been novices when the series launched, but they are now extremely capable and entertaining experts in their chosen fields.

Californian Lisa Lutz belongs to the venerable category of screwball mystery authors, and her CURSE OF THE SPELLMANS (Simon & Schuster, $25) follows her debut in 2007 with *The Spellman Files*, where she introduced the dysfunctional family of private eyes. Now the oddball group is back for a zany encore narrated by the zaniest of the group, thirty-year-old Isabel (a k a Izzy or Izzila).



The rest of the family includes brother David (lawyer, age 32), who's married to Isabel's best friend, Petra; fifteen-year-old sister Rae, precocious and dangerous; and parents Albert and Olivia, owners of home-based Spellman Investigations of San Francisco, California.

Isabel was according to her own admission a "difficult child"—and adolescent and young adult. She's still the most difficult of the Spellmans, although the others have high difficulty quotients of their own.

Rae, for instance, is learning to drive, but then she runs over her instructor. Albert and Olivia are having troubles getting together on a "disappearance" that they can both enjoy. A disappearance is what the Spellmans call a vacation.

But it is Isabel's obsession with a new neighbor that initiates and sustains the confusion and mayhem. Isabel becomes convinced the neighbor, who calls himself "John Brown," is up to no good. And when her attempts to investigate him reveal little verifiable data, she resorts to increasingly bizarre methods—methods with unintended consequences.

Lutz's storytelling style is a bit on the wacky side as well, with short, punchy chapters that zigzag across the timeline and a plethora of footnotes that can be amusing or irritating depending on your tolerance for such things.

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THE ROOM OVER THE BATHHOUSE

On another occasion, I again paid old Hanshichi a visit around New Year's.

"Happy New Year!" I sang out unceremoniously.

"New Year's felicitations to you, too, my good fellow, and best wishes for health and happiness."

The formality of Hanshichi's greeting took me, as a young student, slightly aback. But then he produced the customary bottle of New Year's mulled sake. Since the old man had a low tolerance for alcohol, and I was a virtual teetotaler, it was not long before both our faces had taken on a springlike flush, and the conversation grew more and more animated.

"Could you tell me one of your usual stories—something suitable for spring perhaps?"

"That's a tall order!" the old man said with a laugh, rubbing his forehead thoughtfully. "Almost all the stories in my repertoire are about murderers and thieves. I don't know if I have any that are light and cheerful! Now, let me see . . . I did slip up rather badly a few times. We detectives aren't gods, you know—we don't always get our man. Sometimes we miscalculate. Sometimes we just plain make mistakes. You might say that detective work is a comedy of errors. I'm always bragging about my great deeds, so today, why don't I confess one of my blunders instead? Looking back on it, it really is quite a laughable story!"

The year was 1863. The New Year's pine-tree decorations had already been taken down. Early in the evening of the sixth—the day people used to call "The Sixth Day of New Year's"—a deputy by the name of Kumazō paid Hanshichi a visit at his home in

From The Curious Casebook of Inspector Hanschichi *by Okamoto Kidō, translated by Ian MacDonald, University of Hawai'i Press, 2007. "The Room Over the Bathhouse" ("Yūya no nikai") first appeared in the April 1917 edition of* Bungei Kurabu.

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Kanda's Mikawachō district. Kumazō ran a bathhouse in Atagoshita, so the other deputies had given him the nickname Bathhouse Kuma, or "Bathhouse Bear." He tended to do things in a slapdash manner and often fouled things up, turning in reports that were utter nonsense and making the most outrageous assertions. For that reason, he was also known familiarly as "Boastful Bear."

"Good evening."

"What's up, Kuma?" Hanshichi asked, seated in front of the charcoal brazier. "Got any interesting stories for the New Year?"

"Er . . . matter of fact, boss, that's what I came to see you about . . . there's something I need to tell you."

"Well, out with it. Not another one of your cockamamie stories, is it, Boastful Bear?"

"No . . . not at all," Kumazō replied. "This time there isn't even a hint of boastfulness in it. You see, this past winter—around the middle of the eleventh month—a couple of men started coming every day to use the room over my bathhouse. I felt there was something peculiar about them . . . just odd, if you know what I mean."

People who have read Shikitei Samba's *The Bathhouse of the Floating World* will understand what Kumazō was talking about.[1] From the Edo period on into the early years of the Meiji era, most bathhouses had a room upstairs where young women served tea and cakes. Lazy fellows went there to take naps. Idlers sat about playing chess. Some fast types even went there, wasting their money, just so they could gawk at a pretty woman. Kumazō had just such a room on the second floor of his bathhouse, where he employed an attractive girl by the name of Okichi to serve his customers.

"Get this, boss—the men are samurai. Don't you think that's strange?"

"There's nothing strange about it. Samurai take baths, too, you know."

When a samurai went to a public bathhouse, he was required to take his swords upstairs and check them before entering the bath.[2] There was always a sword rack on the second floor for this purpose.

"But they come every single day without fail!"

"They've been sent up from the provinces,[3] I imagine—and

1. Ukiyo-buro, *a comic novel published in installments from 1809 to 1813.*
2. *Samurai carried two swords, one long and one short.*
3. *As part of the system of* sankin-kōtai, *or "alternate attendance," mandated by the shogun in 1631, provincial lords were required to maintain a residence in Edo and live there every other year. These "secondary residences" were staffed with retainers from the lord's own domain.*

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probably have designs on Okichi!" said Hanshichi, laughing.

"If you don't think it's a bit strange, then listen to this. . . . They've been coming every day for nearly two months. They even showed up on New Year's Eve, New Year's Day, and the day after that! I don't care if they are just provincial samurai stationed here in Edo—no samurai spends the New Year's holidays lazing around in a bathhouse! It doesn't make sense. Not only that, but these two usually show up together in the morning, then come and go as they please during the day. But as soon as it gets dark, they always leave together. And I'll say it again—this has been going on day in and day out since the beginning of winter. Don't you think that's peculiar? I can't help thinking these aren't your usual samurai."

"I see what you mean," Hanshichi said thoughtfully, looking more serious.

"What do you think, boss? What do you suppose the two of them are up to?"

"Imposters, perhaps . . ."

"Exactly!" Kumazō exclaimed, clapping his hands. "That's what I figured! Just pretending to be samurai as a cover for some sinister purpose. They probably meet at my place during the day to hatch their plans, then go out at night and get up to no good. I'm sure that's it."

"It's quite possible. What do these two men look like?"

"They're both young. One guy—must be twenty-two or -three—he's kinda pasty but not bad-looking. The other one . . . same age, a little taller . . . he doesn't look too disreputable either. I guess you could say they're your typical well-heeled playboys. You know the type . . . tip well, don't go prattling on to Okichi about sardines and whale meat like country bumpkins. Matter of fact, I think Okichi's a bit sweet on that pasty one . . . can you believe it? I asked Okichi what those two were always talking about up there, but I don't think she's being straight with me. Today I climbed halfway up the ladder and listened to see if I could catch anything. I heard one of them say, 'We can't just cut him down with our swords. We'll try to talk some sense into him, but if he puts up a fuss, we'll just have to get rough and grab him. . . .' Well, what do you think of that? Sounds like they're up to no good!"

"Hmm . . ." Hanshichi remained pensive.

Lawlessness had been rife in Edo ever since the sails of Commodore Perry's "black ships" were spotted off the coast of the Izu Peninsula in 1853. Gangs of self-styled *rōnin* roamed the streets of the capital threatening rich merchants into handing over

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money as contributions to a so-called military fund for quelling the barbarian invaders. Needless to say, few of these men were true *rōnin*. Most were corrupt retainers of the shogun, dissolute second sons from good families, or simply common city scoundrels. Birds of a feather, they had banded together to rob people indiscriminately and force them to loan them money in the name of a patriotic cause. Hanshichi imagined that the two shady characters at Kumazō's bathhouse were in fact using it as their base for just such operations.

"Well, I guess tomorrow I'll have to go check it out myself."

"I'll be expecting you. If you come around noon, they'll be there for sure," Kumazō promised.

The next morning, before going out, Hanshichi marked the end of the New Year by eating the traditional bowl of rice porridge flavored with spring leaves. Then he dropped in to see his boss in Hatchōbori, who advised him that, due to a public outcry, they were under orders to step up their ongoing investigation of a string of burglary-arsons; Hanshichi was to give it top priority. He grew even more suspicious of the goings-on at Kumazō's bathhouse.

It was eleven o'clock by the time Hanshichi left his boss's house, whereupon he made a beeline for Atagoshita. Though New Year's was long past, the streets were still full of people out making belated New Year's calls. He could hear the lively accompaniment of a lion dance being performed in the street.

Arriving at the bathhouse, Hanshichi slipped in via the back entrance. He found Kumazō waiting for him inside.

"You're just in time, boss. One of the men is here—he's taking a bath right now."

"Is that so? Well, then, maybe I'll just have a dip myself."

Hanshichi went back around to the front and paid the entrance fee like an ordinary customer. At midday, the bathhouse was practically empty. Painted on the low doorway leading through to the bath itself was a picture of a fearsome warrior. Inside, someone could be heard cheerfully singing a popular love song. Entering, Hanshichi saw four or five other men already there. He had a quick dip to warm himself up, then threw on a kimono and went upstairs. Kumazō quietly followed him.

"Was it that fellow closest to the tub?" Hanshichi asked, sipping his tea.

"That's right. The young one."

"He's no imposter—that's for sure."

"So you think he's a genuine samurai?"

"Just look at his legs."

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A samurai always wore a pair of swords—one short, the other long—on his left side, which tended to make his left leg more muscular and the ankle thicker than the right. Having had the chance to observe the man without his clothes on, Hanshichi had no doubt about his credentials.

"So, you figure he's a shogunal retainer?"[4]

"No, his topknot is tied differently . . . he must be a samurai from a provincial fief."

"I see," Kumazō nodded. "Then listen to this, boss—this morning I saw him hand Okichi something to take care of. It was a bundle wrapped in cloth . . . seemed pretty heavy. Shall we take a look at it?"

"By the way, where is Okichi? I haven't seen her."

"Things are slow in here right now, so she's gone out front to watch the lion dance . . . she likes that kind of childish stuff. This would be the perfect time to sneak a peek at that bundle before anyone shows up. There's no telling what kind of clue we might find."

"Good point."

"I think Okichi stuck it in the clothes cupboard . . . wait here a second."

Kumazō went back to search the shelves. He returned with a bundle wrapped in a dark-blue cloth, which he proceeded to untie. Inside, there was another, yellowish-green cloth wrapped around what appeared to be a pair of boxes.

"I better take a quick look around downstairs . . . I'll be right back."

Kumazō climbed down the ladder. He returned a moment later.

"It's all right. I told the attendant downstairs to cough to let us know when the guy comes out of the bath."

Unwrapping the second cloth, they found two old lacquer boxes of the kind used for storing Noh masks. Each was tied shut by a flat, charcoal-gray length of cord, which was attached to the bottom of the box, crossed over the lid, and knotted tightly. Full of eager curiosity, Kumazō hurriedly undid one of the knots.

Even with the lid removed, neither man could make out exactly what was inside. Whatever it was, it was wrapped in some sort of stiff, yellowish substance like fish skin or oil paper.

"What the hell . . . !"

Kumazō could not suppress a cry of astonishment as he undid

4. Gokenin, *a direct vassal of the shogun, similar to a* hatamoto *but lower in rank (and income) and without the privilege of having audiences* (ome-mie) *with the shogun.*

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the wrapping. There, before their eyes, was a severed human head. It was clearly ancient, but so shriveled that it was impossible to tell how many hundreds—if not thousands—of years old it was. The skin had a blackish-yellow hue like decaying leaves. It was not even apparent whether the head was male or female.

For a while the two men just stared at the grotesque object, hardly able to breathe.

[2]

"What do you think it is, boss?"

"Beats me. Anyhow, let's look in the other box."

Kumazō opened the remaining box with obvious distaste. Another carefully wrapped head came tumbling out. This time, however, it was clearly not human but seemed to belong to some monstrous creature—a dragon or a serpent, perhaps—with a large mouth, fangs, and small horns on its head. The flesh was black and shriveled like the first, and as hard as wood or stone.

The combined effect of these two grotesque discoveries left the two men feeling extremely shaken.

"Maybe he's some sort of huckster," Kumazō suggested. The man probably went around exhibiting the bizarre heads at sideshows and such places. Hanshichi, however, was disinclined to accept this theory, adhering to his belief that the man was a genuine samurai. Even so, why in the world would a samurai carry such objects around with him? And why had he casually deposited them with a woman on the second floor of a bathhouse? And what exactly were the objects, anyway? Hanshichi found his wits sorely tested by this riddle.

"I'll be damned if I can figure it out," he admitted.

Just then, they heard the attendant downstairs clear his throat loudly. Hurriedly, the two men returned the objects to their boxes and shoved the bundle back in the clothes cupboard. The lion dance had moved on, its music fading into the distance. Okichi came back inside. Soon, the samurai appeared at the top of the ladder with a damp towel in his hand. Hanshichi put on an innocent look and sat sipping his tea.

Okichi, who knew Hanshichi by sight, had somehow managed to discreetly tip off the samurai to the detective's presence. Without speaking to anyone, the man went and sat in a corner. Kumazō tugged at Hanshichi's sleeve and together they went downstairs.

"I saw Okichi give that fellow a meaningful look, and he tensed up," Hanshichi said. "He's on his guard now, so I don't think we'll get anywhere today."

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"Well, I'll keep a close eye on what they do with those boxes," Kumazō whispered to Hanshichi, clearly annoyed.

"What do you think has happened to that other fellow?" said Hanshichi.

"Yes, he's late today—I wonder why?"

"Anyway, keep your eyes open. I'm counting on you."

With that, Hanshichi left the bathhouse and headed over to Akasaka to look into another case. As he walked through the streets, absorbing the hustle and bustle of early spring, Hanshichi was racking his brains all the while for the key to the riddle of the boxes. But no convincing explanation presented itself. "Perhaps those two samurai practice black magic, and the heads are for incantations or casting spells or something. . . . Or could they be Christian outlaws?"

Since the arrival of the American Black Ships, the government had stepped up its persecution of Christianity.[5] If the two men were indeed adherents of that faith, then the matter demanded serious attention. Whatever the explanation, Hanshichi felt that the two samurai should be closely watched.

His business in Akasaka concluded, Hanshichi returned home. The rest of the evening proved uneventful and he soon went to bed. But the next morning, before it was even light, Bathhouse Bear came bursting into the house.

"Boss! Boss! Something awful's happened! They've finally done it! We were too slow, and now they've gone and . . ."

According to Kumazō's report, the previous night two men dressed as samurai had burst into a pawnshop called the Iseya, not far from Kumazō's bathhouse, and demanded that the proprietor hand over all his available cash for the "military fund." Meeting with some resistance, the men had drawn their swords and wounded the pawnbroker and his head clerk. Then they'd grabbed all the money they could find—about eighty *ryō*—and fled. Their faces had been covered, but their general descriptions matched those of Kumazō's two suspicious customers.

"It was them. There's no doubt about it now—they've been using my place as a base for their raids. We've got to do something quickly!"

5. Christianity had won many converts, primarily in southern Japan, since Portuguese missionaries first arrived in 1549. The Tokugawa shogunate tried various measures to limit the influence of missionaries and eradicate Christianity from the 1610s onward, including confining foreigners to Nagasaki and persecuting large numbers of Japanese converts. In 1639 all missionaries were expelled from Japan, and the remaining Japanese Christians were forced to practice their religion in secret at the risk of execution.

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"Yes, I suppose we oughtn't to let them get away," Hanshichi said as though to himself.

"*Suppose* . . . ? Look, boss—if someone else catches them before we do, you won't be the only one who comes off looking bad. I and my bathhouse will lose face, too."

This was enough to catapult Hanshichi into action. There was nothing he hated more than having a case he was working on swiped from under his nose. On the other hand, he couldn't very well arrest the two men at the bathhouse without any evidence. They were samurai after all, and one had to tread carefully; to go butting in might very well bring retaliation later.

"All right, Kumazō I want you to go home and keep your eyes open to see if the two samurai show up today. I'll head over there as soon as I'm ready."

After sending Kumazō home, Hanshichi had a hasty breakfast, then got ready to go out. Before going to Atagoshita, however, he had something else he wanted to do along the way. He was passing through Hikagechō when he caught sight of a young samurai, seated in front of a swordsmith's called the Aizuya, engaged in some sort of negotiation with the clerk. Looking more closely, he realized it was the owner of the bizarre boxes whom he'd seen yesterday in the room over the bathhouse.

Hanshichi paused and observed the man from a distance. After a while, the clerk handed the samurai some money, and he hurried off. Hanshichi's first instinct was to follow him, but deciding he might learn more if he stayed, he retraced his steps and entered the swordsmith's shop.

"Good morning."

"Ah, Inspector. Good morning." The clerk recognized Hanshichi.

"Pretty cold this spring so far, isn't it?" said Hanshichi as he sat down. "Hope you don't mind my asking, but was that samurai who just left here an acquaintance of yours?"

"No, I've never seen him before. He'd been going around trying to sell this. He was turned away from two or three places before he managed to foist it off on me." The clerk gave a wry smile. Next to him lay some sort of hard object wrapped in oil paper.

"What is it?"

The clerk unwrapped the package to reveal what appeared to be a fish covered in blackish mud. He explained that it was a sharkskin to be used for covering sword hilts and scabbards.

"Sharkskin, you say? It looks pretty disgusting if you ask me."

"Well, it hasn't been cleaned up yet," the clerk replied, turning the sharkskin over to show Hanshichi. "As you know, these sharkskins are imported from overseas. They're covered in mud

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when we get them, but by the time they're washed and polished, they're beautiful and white. It's a time-consuming business, and if we're not careful, we stand to lose quite a bit of money. Because of all the mud, we can't tell if they've got any scrapes or bloodstains on them until we've cleaned them. We can deal with scrapes, but bloodstains are a big problem. You see, when the sharks are killed, blood sometimes seeps from the wound into the skin. No amount of washing and polishing will get it out, and no one wants to buy white sharkskin with black spots on it. Of course, we can hide the spots by staining the skin with lacquer, but then it's not worth half as much. If we buy a sheaf of, say, ten sharkskins, we figure on finding three or four bloodstained ones. We average those into the total price that we're willing to pay. But until they've been cleaned, you never know for sure what you're getting—that's why it's a tricky business."

"I see." Hanshichi nodded as though impressed. To the untrained eye, it seemed incredible that a dirty bit of skin could be polished, like a jewel, into the lustrous beauty of a sharkskin hilt.

"You mean that samurai came to sell you this?" Hanshichi said, turning the sharkskin over and inspecting it.

"It seems he purchased it in Nagasaki.[6] We were haggling over the price—he wanted me to pay quite a lot for it. It's not that I didn't want to buy it, seeing that this is what I do for a living, but I'm a bit uneasy about purchasing something like this from a rank amateur—even if he is a samurai! You can see how muddy it is, and it's just one skin. If I got stuck with a bloodstained one, I'd feel I'd really been had. Well, I tried refusing him, but he was insistent, said he'd take anything for it, so I ended up paying a very modest sum. Even so," the clerk concluded with a rueful laugh, "my boss will probably yell at me."

The man seemed too disheartened about the whole affair to reveal how much he'd actually paid. For his part, Hanshichi refrained from asking. Rather, he was pondering the strange array of objects that the samurai seemed to possess: two shriveled heads—one human and one belonging to some monstrous creature—and now this grubby piece of sharkskin. He sensed that there must be something behind it all.

"Well, I'm sorry to have bothered you."

Gulping down the cup of coarse tea, which a shop assistant had served him out of a large pot, Hanshichi left the Aizuya and headed straight for Atagoshita. When he reached the bathhouse,

6. Nagasaki was Japan's main port of foreign trade. From 1616 to 1859, it was one of only two ports open to non-Chinese foreign ships.

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Kumazō darted out to meet him as though he'd been eagerly awaiting his arrival.

"Boss, that young guy who was here yesterday showed up a while ago and went out again straightaway."

"Was he carrying anything?"

"He had a long, narrow bundle with him, but I don't know what it was."

"Is that so? I saw him on my way over. What about the other fellow?"

"Like before, the tall one hasn't shown up yet."

"All right, Kuma. I'm sorry to send you off like this, but I want you to go back to the Iseya and find out exactly what was stolen from the pawnshop apart from the money."

Having issued his instructions, Hanshichi went upstairs, where he found Okichi sitting idly in front of the charcoal brazier. This was the detective's second appearance in two days, and a look of unease seemed to creep into her eyes, but she forced herself to smile.

"Hello, Inspector," she greeted him affably. "Cold today, isn't it?"

She brought him tea and cakes and hovered over him attentively. But Hanshichi paid her scant attention. Instead, he filled his pipe and lit it; then he took out some money wrapped up in paper and gave it to her, saying it was a tip because he'd troubled her so much of late.

"Thank you very much, sir."

"By the way, are your mother and brother well?"

Okichi's older brother, he knew, worked as a plasterer, and her mother was in her fifties.

"They're both well, thank you."

"Your brother's still young, but your mother's getting on in years, isn't she? So remember the old saying: 'Don't postpone filial piety until our parents are in their graves.' Now's the time to be a good daughter, you hear?"

"Yes, sir," Okichi blushed, her eyes downcast.

For some reason, she seemed to be embarrassed, guilty, and frightened all at the same time. But Hanshichi pressed ahead.

"By the way," he said in a bantering tone, "I heard some talk of a romance in your life. Is it true?"

"Oh, Inspector . . . really!" Okichi blushed an even deeper shade of red.

"Actually, everyone's talking about it—they say you've become real pally with one of those two samurai who started coming in here last year."

"Well, you could put it like that."

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"What do you mean, 'put it like that'? Actually, Okichi, that's what I've been meaning to talk to you about. What fief are those two samurai from? They look like west-country types to me."

"So I've heard," Okichi answered vaguely.

"Well, I'm sorry to say this, but sooner or later I might have to ask you to come down to the watchpost with me. I just wanted to warn you in advance."

Okichi did not miss the note of intimidation in Hanshichi's voice, and a look of fear crept into her eyes again.

"What is it you want to ask me, Inspector?"

"About those two samurai. Or would you prefer to tell me everything now, without having to come to the watchpost?"

Okichi tensed and fell silent.

"Tell me, what line of work are they in? All right—so they're in service to some provincial lord here in the capital. But you can't expect me to believe they spend all their time loafing around on the second floor of a bathhouse, day in and day out—even at New Year's! They're running some shady business on the side, aren't they? Now, don't tell me you don't know anything about it—I know you do. C'mon, why don't you come clean? What's in those boxes they left in that cupboard?"

Okichi trembled and her face turned from red to ashen.

[3]

Although she worked in the bathhouse, Okichi was still just a naïve young girl. Hanshichi's threats so terrified her that she could scarcely breathe. She still maintained, however, that she knew nothing about the two men's identities.

"I heard them say their lord's residence is near Azabu, but I swear I don't know anything else," she insisted. But Hanshichi continued to coax and cajole her, and at last she offered up one more piece of information.

"It seems they're on a vendetta."

"A vendetta," Hanshichi said, bursting into laughter. "You must be joking! This isn't kabuki, you know. These days a couple of samurai don't just launch a vendetta in the middle of Edo! All right, though . . . for now, let's just say that they are on a vendetta. Do you mean you have no idea where they live?"

"None whatsoever."

Hanshichi continued to press Okichi, but when it seemed he would get nothing more out of her, he fell quiet and sat thinking for a while. At that moment, Kumazō's head appeared above the opening in the floor at the top of the ladder.

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"Boss!" he called out excitedly. "Could you come down here for a minute?"

"What's all the fuss about?"

With self-conscious calm, Hanshichi descended the ladder. Kumazō sidled up to him and whispered, "It turns out that three old kimonos and five sharkskins were taken from the Iseya in addition to the cash."

"Sharkskins," Hanshichi repeated, his pulse quickening. "Had they been cleaned already, or were they still covered in mud?"

"Hmm, I didn't ask them that . . . guess I'd better go back and find out, huh?"

Kumazō left again in a hurry. He returned to report that they had been white, polished sharkskins, which the pawnbroker had received from a hilt maker in Rogetsuchō. Hanshichi was a bit disappointed at this news; it meant that he could no longer link the samurai who broke into the Iseya the previous night with the man who sold the sharkskin to the Aizuya that morning.

"Well, it beats me," he said.

In any case, it was already nearly noon, so he and Kumazō went out for a meal at a nearby restaurant.

"It seems Okichi is really stuck on that samurai," Hanshichi said, laughing.

"That's just it—that's why we can't get anywhere. Why don't we go lean on her a bit?"

"No, I already scared the life out of her—that's enough for now. It won't do us any good to overdo it, so let's just leave her alone for a while."

The two men left the restaurant, toothpicks still drooping from between their lips. As they approached the bathhouse, they spotted one of the young samurai parting the curtain on his way out. No mistake, it was the man Hanshichi had seen in Hikagechō. He was carefully holding something wrapped in a yellowish-green cloth. It appeared to be one of the boxes.

"There's that fellow now! Looks like he's making off with a box," Kumazō said, drawing himself up with a glint in his eyes.

"No doubt about it. Go and follow him."

"Right."

Kumazō headed off in pursuit. Hanshichi entered the bathhouse and went upstairs to check on the boxes. Okichi was nowhere to be seen. An inspection of the cupboard revealed that both boxes were indeed missing.

"They're gone!"

He climbed back down the ladder and asked the attendant what had become of Okichi. The man told him that she had descended

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the ladder only a few moments earlier and disappeared into the back of the house. Hanshichi headed in the same direction. According to the man stoking the fire that heated the baths, Okichi had said she was stepping outside for a moment, then had rushed out of the back door into the street.

"Was she carrying anything?"

"I dunno."

The man was a country bumpkin, totally oblivious of what was going on around him. Hanshichi clicked his tongue in frustration. Undoubtedly, the samurai and Okichi had happened to return to the bathhouse just as he and Kumazō were out eating lunch, and quickly decided to abscond with the boxes, one of them slipping out the front door and the other out the back.

"I've really gone and bungled it!" Hanshichi thought. He could have kicked himself for his carelessness. "If I'd known this was going to happen, I'd have hauled that Okichi girl off to the watch-post in the first place."

Hanshichi returned to the front of the house and asked the bath attendant where Okichi lived. Her house was located in Shiba just outside the main gate of the Shinmei Shrine, he was told; so he headed straight over. Okichi's brother was out at work, but her mother, an honest-looking woman, was alone, mending some well-worn clothes. Okichi had gone out as usual that morning, she said, and had not returned home since. There was no trace of duplicity in the woman's face. Moreover, it seemed unlikely that Okichi could be hiding anywhere in such a small house.

His spirits deflated, Hanshichi left. By the time he reached the bathhouse, Kumazō had already returned. He directed a look of disappointment at Hanshichi.

"Bad news, boss. I ran into a friend along the way, and was just having a word with him when that guy gave me the slip."

"Idiot! How could you stop to shoot the breeze with a friend when you're in the middle of a case!" But he realized that bawling out Kumazō wouldn't do any good. Hanshichi chafed with frustration.

"After what's happened today, I don't know whether to laugh or cry. I want you to watch carefully to see if Okichi returns. And if the other samurai comes, I want you to trail him . . . and make sure you find out where he lives this time! This investigation was all your idea—let's see if you can take your job seriously for a change."

Hanshichi left Kumazō and went home. He was still so wound up, however, that he spent a restless night.

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It was freezing the next morning. Splashing cold water on his face in his usual routine, Hanshichi hurried out of the house, only to find the alleyway in back, where the sun hadn't reached, covered in a sheet of ice. Some local children had apparently emptied the neighbor's rain barrel onto the street as a prank; the ice looked two or three inches thick and was hard as steel.

It was so cold that Hanshichi could see his breath as he hurried toward Atagoshita.

"Well, Kuma? Any new developments since last night?"

"Boss, Okichi seems to have eloped. She never went home last night. Her mother came by this morning to ask after her because she was worried," Kumazō spoke in a hushed voice, frowning.

"Is that so?" Hanshichi replied. His brow, too, was deeply furrowed. "Well, there's nothing we can do. Let's just set our nets and be patient. There's still a chance the other fellow will show up."

"I guess so," Kumazō responded in a vacant and desultory manner.

Hanshichi went upstairs. Since Okichi had not shown up that morning, there was no heat in the room yet. Kumazō's wife appeared, offering her apologies, and brought in the charcoal brazier and some tea. No other customers were upstairs yet and Hanshichi sat there alone, absentmindedly smoking his pipe, shivering as he felt the spring chill creep under his collar.

"That Okichi's been so flighty of late she hasn't even mended the paper screens," Kumazō said, tut-tutting disapprovingly as he turned to look at the tattered shoji.

Lost in thought, Hanshichi made no response. The grotesque heads he had found there in the bathhouse the day before yesterday . . . the mud-covered sharkskin he had seen yesterday in Hikagechō—the three objects fused together and raced round and round in his mind like a revolving picture lantern. Was it black magic, Christianity, or just plain old-fashioned robbery? Hanshichi could find no easy solution to the conundrum. Moreover, he was still kicking himself for allowing the samurai to get away the day before. It was all his own fault for having asked a nincompoop like Kumazō to trail the man rather than doing it himself.

Seeing the disgruntled look on his boss's face, Kumazō simply sat quietly whiling away the time. Presently, the bell on the hill in Shiba struck ten o'clock. At that moment, they heard the lattice door downstairs open and the voice of the attendant greeting a customer. Then they heard him clear his throat as though sending a signal to the two of them upstairs. Hanshichi and Kumazō looked at each other.

"He's here!" Kumazō exclaimed, jumping up excitedly and peer-

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ing downstairs. At that very moment, the taller of the two young samurai came climbing swiftly up the ladder carrying his swords.

"Ah, come in!" said Kumazō, smiling affably. "Another cold day, isn't it? Have a seat. The young lady has taken the day off, so I'm afraid it's a bit messy up here."

"Taken the day off?" the samurai said, cocking his head slightly to one side as he placed his swords on the sword rack. "Is Okichi sick?" he asked in a meaningful tone.

"Well now, she didn't say exactly. She's probably caught some bug that's going around."

The samurai nodded silently for a moment, and then took off his kimono and went downstairs.

"Is that the other one?" Hanshichi asked in a low voice.

Kumazō nodded. "What should we do, boss?"

"Well, we can't very well arrest him just like that. Listen—when he comes back, think of a good way to ask him about his partner without arousing his suspicions. What we decide to do after that will depend on his answer. Don't forget, he's a samurai. Better hide his swords somewhere—things could get tricky if he started brandishing them about."

"All right. Should we call in some reinforcements?"

"That shouldn't be necessary. There's only one of him, after all. We'll handle him somehow," Hanshichi said, feeling inside his kimono to check that he had his truncheon.[7]

The two men waited in great suspense.

[4]

"It's a silly story, I'm afraid," old Hanshichi said to me with a smile. "Looking back on it now, it all seems so ridiculous!" Then he continued.

"We waited for the samurai to return, whereupon Kumazō, with an innocent air, started asking him questions. His answers were pretty vague, and it seemed to me he was hiding something. I chimed in a few times to try to find out more, but a lot of what he said just didn't make sense. Finally, I got so impatient that I whipped out my truncheon. My, what a stupid thing to do!" Hinshichi laughed. "One should never be too hasty. But the samurai seemed to realize he was cornered and finally confessed what they had really been up to. It was just as Okichi had said—they were on a vendetta!"

"A vendetta . . . ," I echoed. Hanshichi gave me a big grin.

7. Jitte. *A forked metal instrument used to ward off sword blows and subdue criminals.*

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"A genuine, honest-to-goodness vendetta! But wait—it gets even stranger. Listen to this . . ."

The samurai whom Hanshichi had threatened with his truncheon, Kajii Gengorō by name, was from a fief in the west country. His lord had a mansion in Azabu, and Gengorō had been sent to Edo the previous spring to serve there. He was a man who enjoyed the good life; he became close friends with a colleague, one Takashima Yashichi, and the two together would make the rounds of the pleasure quarters in the Yoshiwara and Shinagawa. Gradually, they came to feel very much at home in Edo.

Then, at the beginning of November, they invited two of their fellow retainers, Kanzaki Gōsuke and Mobara Ichiroemon, to visit a brothel in Shinagawa with them. While they were there, Gōsuke and Ichiroemon got drunk and started a quarrel. Gengorō and Yashichi intervened and managed to effect a reconciliation. But Gōsuke declared that he'd had enough and wanted to go straight home. Gengorō and Yashichi tried to prevent him from leaving; it was already well past their curfew, so he'd have to spend the night there and go back in the morning, they said. But Gōsuke was adamant.

They couldn't very well let Gōsuke go home alone, so in the end all four men had left the brothel together. It was past eight o'clock when they approached the coast of Takanawa. Torches aboard two or three fishing boats floated forlornly in the darkness of the ocean, and a sobering north wind blew frost in their faces. Packhorses hurried along past them on the road heading for the next station, the sound of their bells ringing out in the night seeming to magnify the chill. For some time, Gōsuke had been walking quietly beside them, but at some point he must have fallen a step or two behind the others and unsheathed his sword. No sooner did Ichiroemon see something glimmer in the darkness than he cried out and fell to the ground. Withdrawing his sword immediately, Gōsuke set off running at full speed in the direction of Shiba.

For some time, Gengorō and Yashichi stood dumbstruck, rooted to the spot. Ichiroemon had been cut down with a single stroke that ran from his shoulder diagonally across his back. He had died instantly. It was too late to do anything for him, so they loaded his body in the first free palanquin they could find and transported it back to Azabu, arriving in the dead of night. The murder of a fellow samurai as the result of a drunken brawl at a house of ill-repute was an inexcusable offense that could not go unpunished. A search was immediately mounted, but five days passed, then

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ten, and still no one had any clue as to Gōsuke's whereabouts.

The murdered man, Ichiroemon, had a younger brother named Ichijirō, who immediately requested permission from their lord to undertake a vendetta.[8] Ichijirō's request was granted. He was told, however, that officially he could not be released from service to carry out the vendetta. Instead, he was granted leave so that he could return his brother's ashes to his place of birth—and was told that it would not hurt if he stopped along the way to worship at temples or pay visits to relatives. In other words, he was given tacit permission to pursue his brother's killer under the guise of these other activities. After expressing his gratitude and making the proper obeisances, Ichijirō set off from Edo carrying his brother's remains.

Gengorō and Yashichi were censured for having entered a brothel district, an act unbecoming to a samurai. It was also noted that in regard to the bloodshed on the night in question, they had shown extreme negligence in allowing the murderer to get away, and for that they were severely reprimanded. Moreover, for this act of carelessness they were ordered to assist Ichijirō in his vendetta, with the proviso that they could not set foot in any other clan's domain. "Search every inch of Edo for a hundred days and find the murderer," they were ordered.

It was far from clear, even, whether Gōsuke was in fact hiding in Edo, but the two men had their orders: they must walk the length and breadth of Edo from dawn to dusk, day after day, searching for him. For the first ten days or so, they conscientiously carried out their duty, but then their resolve began to flag due to the enormity of their task. In the end, they came up with a plan for shirking their duty: they would leave their lord's estate each morning at the usual hour and spend the entire day amusing themselves at teahouses, storyteller's halls, and bathhouses. One day, they would go to Asakusa's busy shopping district, the next they would visit the samurai mansions of Hongō—in these ways they idled away the time, afterward returning to the estate to report on the supposed progress of their search. Needless to say, they made no attempt to ascertain Gōsuke's whereabouts.

Because they spent all their time amusing themselves, the two samurai were obliged by financial necessity to choose places that were inexpensive. They eventually settled on the second floor of the bathhouse as their headquarters, only venturing out from time to time for the sake of appearances. It was while they were there

8. It was official policy that anyone wishing to undertake a vendetta (kataki-uchi) *had to apply to the government for permission. The practice was outlawed in 1873.*

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that one of them, Yashichi, became a little too friendly with Okichi. "Stop this vendetta business—it's dangerous," she was forever urging him, concerned for his safety.

There was little chance that they would ever track Gōsuke down in this manner. Even were they to discover his whereabouts, they had not steeled themselves for the task of assisting Ichigirō in carrying out his vendetta. As time went by, they could not help thinking more and more about their own future. In the event that the one-hundredth day came and they still had not found Gōsuke, their ineptness would be exposed. It was unreasonable that they had been ordered to track Gōsuke down within a stipulated period of time, given that it was far from certain he was still in Edo. Nevertheless, there was nothing they could do about it. They thought it unlikely that they would be dismissed outright from their lord's service, but they accepted the fact that they would be sent back to their provincial domain for dereliction of duty. As they lazed away the days, their anxiety about their impending exile from Edo began to weigh on their minds like a heavy stone.

"Well then, I'll become a *rōnin!*" Yashichi declared one day, with Okichi hovering in the background. He dreaded the day when he would be sent back to his domain and would no longer be able to see her. Gengorō, too, was apprehensive about being sent home, but in the absence of any similarly compelling motive, he could not summon the courage to cut his ties with his master. Unlike Yashichi, who was all alone in the world, Gengorō had a mother, an older brother, and a younger sister waiting for him back in the provinces.

"Now, don't be so hotheaded, Yashichi," said Gengorō soothingly. But when spring came, Yashichi seemed to have made up his mind once and for all. Every morning when he left the estate, he removed a few of his important personal effects and took them to Okichi's house. It was around the same time that the owner of the bathhouse, Kumazō, began to look askance at him. Okichi had whispered in Yashichi's ear that her boss was a detective's deputy, and Yashichi, fed up with being regarded with suspicion, was becoming increasingly restless. Now, it looked as though he and Okichi had absconded. Alarmed when Yashichi had not returned to the estate the previous night, Gengorō had come to the bathhouse that morning to look for his friend.

Listening to his story, Hanshichi understood the reason for their vendetta and for Yashichi and Okichi's elopement. But what about the suspicious boxes that Yashichi had deposited with Okichi?

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"Those are his family heirlooms," Gengorō explained.

When Toyotomi Hideyoshi decided to conquer Korea,[9] a certain Takashima Yagoemon—Yashichi's ancestor ten generations back—had followed his lord and signed on with Hideyoshi's invading army. Subsequently, as his share of the spoils, Yagoemon had received the objects in question—two shriveled heads, one human and one belonging to some unknown creature, which a Korean priestess had used for performing black magic and chanting spells; it seemed they were considered extremely sacred. Never having seen anything like them before, Yagoemon had brought them back to Japan with him, but no one could tell him exactly what they were. Be that as it may, they had been passed down from generation to generation along with other family treasures. There was no one in their home province who had not heard of them. Once, Yashichi had even allowed Gengorō to look at them. Presumably, this unusual treasure was the first thing that Yashichi had given to Okichi for safekeeping when he decided to leave his lord's mansion.

Gengorō knew nothing about the sharkskin, he said. Yashichi's grandfather had been stationed in Nagasaki for a long time, so he'd probably acquired it from a foreigner. Yashichi must have sold it because he needed the money, but the other two items would have been impossible to sell. Moreover, as old family heirlooms, Yashichi would probably have wanted to take them with him when he and Okichi eloped. Where were the two of them now, as they wandered about the countryside carrying the heads of a human being and a dragon? Somehow, it was both amusing and pathetic at the same time. Certainly, it was a "lovers' journey" to rival any in the kabuki drama of the past.

"I have to admit now it was too late for me to back out," old Hanshichi said, rubbing his forehead. "There I was, waving my truncheon about the place—it was most inexcusable. But that samurai Gengorō was very understanding about it all. In fact, we had a good laugh together afterward, and that put an end to the whole affair. The other one, Yashichi, never did return to the mansion in Azabu, nor was Okichi ever heard from again. There were rumors that their journey took them as far as Kanagawa, where they went into hiding. I wonder what happened to them after that? I never heard, either, what became of that fellow Ichijirō and his vendetta. Gengorō was not sent back home after all, and he

9. The invasion was ordered by Hideyoshi on April 24, 1592, and an army of nearly 200,000 troops was assembled. The Japanese invaders captured Seoul on June 12 of the same year, but retreated in May 1593 under an onslaught by Korean guerilla fighters and a Chinese army.

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often used to drop by the bathhouse to say hello. The *rōnin* who robbed the pawnbroker's turned out to be entirely different people—they were later arrested in the Yoshiwara. During the Meiji era, I once asked someone about that bizarre human head, and he said he thought it was probably some sort of mummy; but I really wonder. . . . Anyhow, it was the strangest thing I've ever seen in my life."

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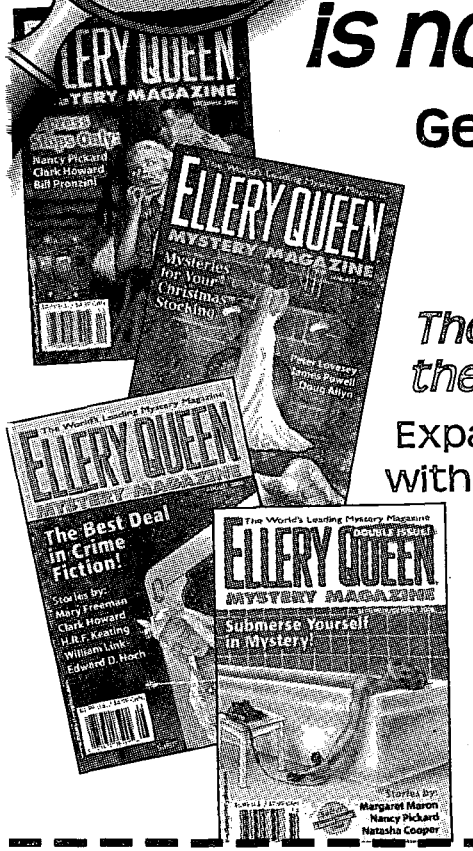
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THE STORY THAT WON

The November Photograph contest was won by Adrian W. Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota. Honorable mentions go to Lark Lucente of Courtland, Virginia; Randall A. Martin of Topeka, Kansas; Monty F. Melville of Seminole, Florida; Stephen D. Rogers of Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; Gil Stern of Las Vegas, Nevada; James A. Stewart of Butler, Pennsylvania; Virginia Thompson of Alameda, California; and Valerie Whisenand of Glencoe, Arkansas.



Susan Alinangan/Images.com

BE IT EVER SO . . . AUTHENTIC

ADRIAN W. LUDENS

"What a dump," Nick exclaimed as he gazed up at the dilapidated structure.

"Glad you think so," Christopher replied, sarcasm edging into his voice. They got out of the car for a closer look.

Nick shoved his hands into the pockets of his varsity letter jacket and glanced at his companion. "Creepy old place; you'd probably feel right at home here."

"Sure, make fun of the goth," Christopher shot back, his mouth twisting in a sardonic smile. "You jocks are so predictable."

"Chill out," Nick said defensively. "Let's go in and check everything out. We can't use it for the fraternity haunted house if we don't make sure it's structurally sound first."

The front door shrieked as if in protest as the pair pushed it open and cautiously stepped inside. Nick paused, but Christopher disappeared into what was once the living room. The windows were boarded over, and the meager rays of light that glimmered through the cracks in the plaster waned as clouds obscured the sun.

The floor creaked as Nick stepped gingerly into the darkened room.

"This place is almost perfect." Christopher's voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. "We just need a lost spirit trapped inside it's walls to make it authentic."

"You mean like a ghost?" Nick asked.

"Precisely," Christopher agreed. "Preferably the victim of a violent crime." His fingers found the switchblade in the pocket of his black trench coat.

Nick froze and listened intently. He heard the sound too late.

SNIK.

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THE LINEUP

GARY ALEXANDER's last story for AHMM was "Sangria" (January/February 2007).

Booked & Printed columnist ROBERT C. HAHN reviews mysteries for *Publishers Weekly* and *New York Post*, among other places.

TONI L. P. KELNER won the Agatha Award last year for her story "Sleeping with the Plush" (AHMM, May 2006). She is the author of *Without Mercy*, published by Five Star.

OKAMOTO KIDŌ's Inspector Hanshichi stories first appeared in 1917 in *Bungei Kurabu (The Literature Club)*. By 1937 Kidō had published sixty-nine such stories.

R. T. LAWTON is the president of the Rocky Mountain chapter of Mystery Writers of America. "The Bondholder" is his fifteenth story in AHMM.

IAN MACDONALD holds a Ph.D. in Japanese literature and art history from Stanford and was awarded the Shizuoka International Translation Prize in 1997. His latest translation, *The Budding Tree* by Kitahara Aiko, a collection of stories about women set in the Edo period, has just been published.

JAS. R. PETRIN's last story for AHMM was "Car Trouble" (December 2007).

JAMES POWELL has published stories in AHMM, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, and *Playboy*. His last story for AHMM was "A Tale of Two Dickens" (January/February 2006).

J. RENTILLY is a Los Angeles–based journalist who covers film, music, and literature for a variety of national and international publications.

"Table for None" is B. K. STEVENS's twenty-fifth story for AHMM since 1988. Her last story to appear in the magazine was "Death on a Diet" (May 2006).

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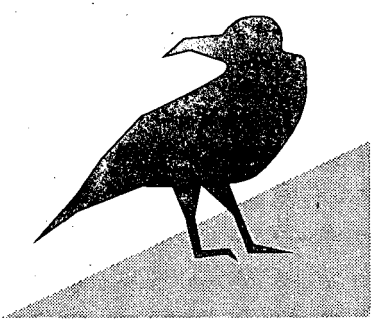
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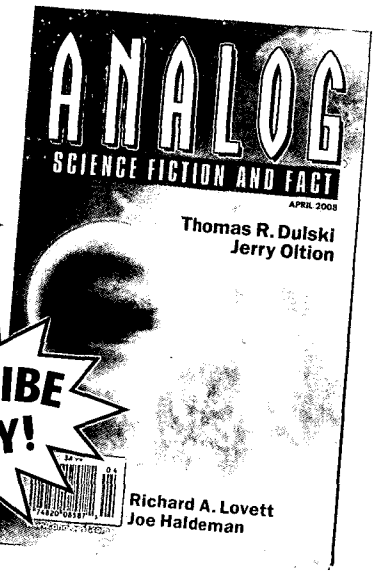
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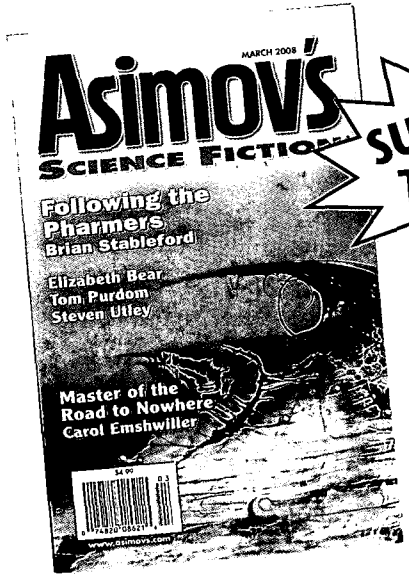
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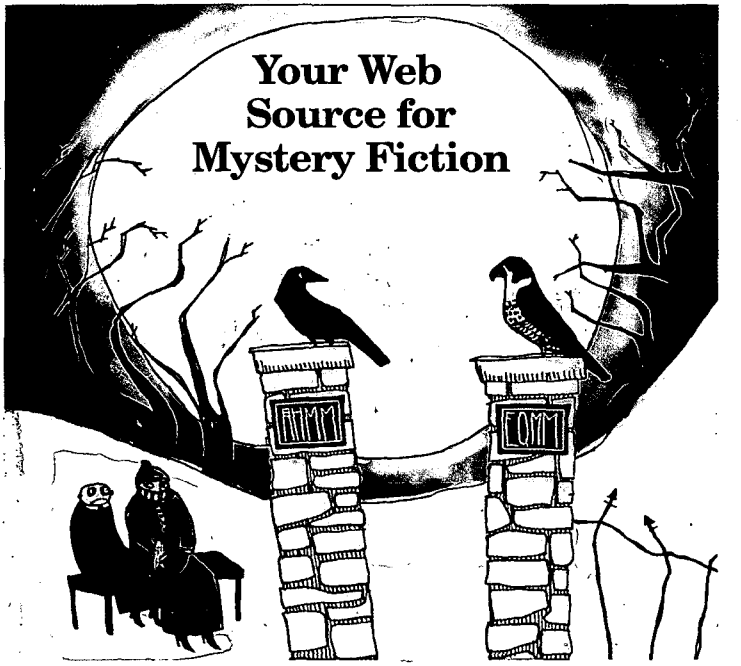
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